

The Path To That Scenery

By: TheBoon

It was an instant, but in that instant Eren saw a glimpse of a new future, one that held true freedom. He finally had another option besides the Rumbling and he takes it. He's flung back in time where he'll fight for the true freedom he so desperately wants. With all of his memories of the future, he'll keep moving forward.

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Building Blocks

Chapter 1: Building Blocks

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"You must stop Eren..."

The words of his dead and estranged father echoed in Zeke's mind as he and Eren exited their father's memories. A sharp pain akin to that of a knife jabbed its way into his head and radiated behind his eyes while a deafening sound of thunder crackled in his eardrums. Zeke fell to the ground, struggling to catch his breath and organize his mind. This was mostly due to the events and revelations of the past few years (though technically moments in the Paths) of Grisha's memories that he experienced along with Eren. Although a small part of Zeke hated to admit it, a large portion of the mental struggle within him at that moment was because of the sad, but slightly cathartic reunion he had with his father.

The words Zeke had always wanted to hear from his father also drifted back into his mind.

" I love you."

All those years. The years of turmoil and indoctrination filled with words of frustration and anger directed at Zeke seemed to melt away when Grisha uttered that oh so immaculate and refreshing phrase.

" I wish I could have spent more time with you..."

"Oi."

A cold voice wrenched Zeke from his thoughts and his eyes widened as he finally began to calm down and reorganize his mind. He had lost his cool. How unlike him...

The man on the ground followed the direction from which the voice came until he locked eyes with Eren Yeager, his younger brother. While Zeke had been thrown to the ground from the shock of leaving Grisha's memories so abruptly, his younger brother had seemingly not been as affected by it. As Eren stood above Zeke with a cold and annoyed grimace on his face, Zeke was able to make out the slight discomfort in his eyes.

"He's keeping up that front of his, but I can see the shock has also taken a toll on him," thought Zeke.

"You still haven't seen the part where I eat our old man yet," stated Eren as he tugged on the chains of soil which rooted him to the ground.

Eren's eyes held such a bitterness in them that it made Zeke crawl back a foot or two.

"You..." rasped Zeke as he took the moment to swallow and wet his dry throat. "You made dad- I mean Grisha eat the King of the Walls. You set us on the path to war with the rest of the world?"

Eren gave him no answer, only staring as the faint light of the Coordinate glowed behind him. Zeke dug his elbows into the earth beneath them to steady himself and slowly make his way to his feet.

"If... if the Attack titan really can send its memories through time, then it's possible that you would only show Grisha memories which were convenient for your plan. By doing that... you could influence the past!"

Again, Eren gave no indication to confirm or deny Zeke's claim, so he continued.

"He wasn't sure if he could complete his duty as a Restorationist, but you pushed him to keep moving forward," Zeke stated, now on his knees as he spoke. "Through your memories, he learned that he wouldn't be able to use the power of the Founding, but he left it in

your hands anyway. He must've seen something in your memories which convinced him. What did you show him?"

Eren broke eye contact for the first time since Zeke started talking, but quickly met his gaze again. This time, Eren opened his mouth to speak.

"Thank you brother. Thanks to you bringing us into dad's memories, the path to my goal is laid out now."

Eren didn't answer Zeke's question, but that didn't bother the elder brother because he expected to be ignored anyway. Zeke's mind was going a million miles an hour, trying to piece together every possible thing that he could. The panic was starting to set in as he realized that he might have been out of options.

"Grisha said your wish would come true, not mine," muttered Zeke as he slowly sank into despair.

"Yes." He answered his brother quietly, not enjoying the fact that he had hurt his sibling, but there was something else stirring in Eren's eyes. "I saw the memories of myself from the future through our old man's memories. It was four years ago when I saw that view." After Eren answered, his head slowly tilted downwards in... disappointment?

" *Why is he making such a face?*" pondered Zeke internally. The expression on Eren's face had hit Zeke in the stomach. It lit a fire in Zeke's spirit as he remembered something extremely crucial.

"FOUNDER YMIR! TAKE AWAY THE ABILITY FOR ALL SUBJECTS OF YMIR TO REPRODUCE!"

Zeke almost chuckled to himself as he rectified such a simple blunder. He still had control of the Founder and almost forgot to use it. Perhaps the whole fiasco with his father almost made him stumble when he was so close to the finish line...

The disappointment on Eren's face dropped immediately and was instead replaced with panic at the sight behind him.

Ymir had begun to move...

"Shit! She's heading for the Coordinate!" cursed Eren as he began to wrestle with the earthen chains more violently.

Zeke only watched from his comfortable position on the cool soil beneath their feet. As he watched Eren fight against fate, he couldn't help but feel pity. Nevertheless, he had to finish this now.

"Dad told me something as we reunited in his memories. He told me to stop you. He regretted leaving everything to you." As Zeke was putting the final nail in the coffin which would seal his victory, he watched as Eren tried with all his might to break free from the chains. He fought and pulled against his fate until his face resembled that of a feral beast.

"I don't know what kind of sight you saw in father's memories, but judging by the face you made earlier, I'm willing to bet it's not a good one. Besides, it's not as if you've seen the entire future. Indeed, if you had, you would have known that you wouldn't be able to use the power of the Founder here."

Eren fought against the chains like a rabid beast, digging his heels into the soil to gain any type of leverage. He couldn't lose here. His memories weren't wrong. There was no other option.

"You're still powerless..." uttered Zeke.

With all the strength he could muster, Eren roared upon hearing those words. His hot breath created a vapor in the air as his scream ripped and shredded his vocal chords. He had to fight. The chains had long since cut off the circulation in his hands. Seconds later, he could feel and hear the ripping of flesh as his fingers began to break and give way to make room for his hands to slip from the chains.

Finally, his hands came free in a spray of blood and flesh. His momentum propelled him forward with great speed towards his target: the Founder.

Zeke took note of this and the pity for his naive, younger brother intensified.

"It's no use Eren," sighed Zeke. "Once Ymir begins to move..."

The glow from the Coordinate washed over all three of them in an intense, yet barely noticeable pulse of light.

Eren's legs kicked off the ground with all his strength in every step. Mere seconds after he had freed himself from his bindings, he had already caught up with the mysterious little girl. He reached his hand towards her and caught her by the strap of her shabby clothes before wrapping his arms around her in an embrace.

" No one can stop her."

As Zeke finished, he noticed a faint spark of light wash over Eren and the Founder.

Eren noticed it too. And much more...

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The Attack titan holder found himself seeing something the moment he touched Ymir. It was the memories of her life, the remnants of the legacy of a vile king.

Her capture.

Her tongue being cut out because slaves didn't need them.

The pigs.

Her escape into the tree.

The transformation of the first titan.

Her life of servitude.

Her life as a mother.

Her life as a warrior.

The assassination attempt.

The feeling of death.

The feeling of eternal servitude in the afterlife.

The feeling of... loneliness.

Eren felt absolutely repulsed. She had no freedom. She never experienced *true* freedom. As the rage built up inside him and he continued to embrace her, another memory made its way into his mind.

It wasn't a memory of Ymir's, but it wasn't one of his either. He saw something in that moment.

Another option.

In that memory, a man held an infant close to his chest. He tenderly stroked the child's head and whispered into its ear. The child stirred in its sleep.

" You are free."

Around the man was the world in its entire beauty. A tree which cast shade on the man and the infant. A gentle wind rustling golden blades of grass as the sun gently hovered above them. The quiet, but stoic crashing of the sea resounding in their eardrums. Most of all, what shocked Eren to his core was one thing.

He realized in that moment that he had never experienced true freedom either. Like Ymir, he was ignorant to the concept. What he saw in that memory was indeed freedom. This was the scenery worth fighting for.

As soon as the memory came, it had been zapped away from him in a golden flash of light and Eren found himself back in the Paths.

He was clutching a little girl whose eyes held no light and his wounds had been spilling blood onto her already dirty clothes. Eren had been abruptly wrenched from that memory, but something was off when he came back to his senses.

Ymir had stopped.

Eren swallowed the lump in his throat and, still clutching the girl tightly to his body, almost cried as he spoke.

"That's it! I've had enough of this! Help me reach the freedom we just saw!"

"Huh?" Zeke choked.

The girl in his arms shuddered and Eren continued.

"I know you saw it too! That was true freedom! I've kept on this path because I had no other option, but now I have one! We have one!"

The darkness which had been cast upon the girls eyes slowly began to fade and light returned to them.

"You're no god! Or a slave! You're just a person! Please lend me your power!"

At this point, Zeke had gotten to his feet and began to make his way towards the pair in confusion and disbelief. "What did you say Eren?" asked Zeke. "True freedom? HEY!"

Eren ignored his elder brother and continued. "You don't have to obey anyone. You don't even have to obey me! Make your own choice for once! Do you want to stay here, or see that freedom with your own eyes!?"

"Wait! STOP!" screamed Zeke as he raced towards them. He was still kind of wobbly from the years of going through Grisha's memories.

The girl in Eren's arms reacted for a second time, taking hold of his forearm with her thin hands.

"Was it you leading me here all this time?" whispered Eren. "You must have been lonely waiting here for 2000 years..."

The girl's grip on Eren tightened and she nodded.

Zeke was almost upon them now and his footsteps became audible as they crashed into the cool soil. "What are you doing Ymir! Take away the Eldians' ability to reproduce! NOW!"

"What's your choice Ymir?" asked Eren. The light of the Coordinate shined brighter than ever, and Eren shielded his eyes. However, through the light, he could make out the face of the girl for the first time. As she began to sob, Ymir looked Eren in the eyes and nodded.

Finally, the light of the Coordinate encompassed the entirety of the Paths and Eren felt a sudden weightlessness as all of his senses were robbed from him. The only thing he could feel as his mind was beginning to get pulled somewhere far away, was Ymir's thin hands gently shake his own.

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Finally. I finally have another choice.

I tried and tried to find another option. For four years I listened to Hange and tried to find peace with the world, but they only bore hatred for us. Time and time again I saw their hatred. Time and time again the fact that there was no other option was rubbed in my face. I hated myself. I was such a piece of shit. I couldn't find another choice so I embraced the only one I was given. I killed innocents, children too, all in hopes of that future in father's memories.

Then, just like that, I saw that other future within that memory. If I fought hard for the future before, I would have to fight harder for this new one which has been laid out before me. The fire in my heart for freedom burned even hotter.

My goal has been set, now it's time to create my path there. This isn't just for me, it's for Mikasa, Armin, and everyone on Paradis. This freedom is for those who have died and will die. It's for Ymir too. I promised she would see that freedom too.

I didn't want to become a monster, but I had no choice and I fear this new future will require me to become one as well. I don't want to become a monster again, but I'll do what I must to obtain that freedom, even if it leads to me becoming even more of a piece of shit.

Eren's resolve echoed in his own mind as he tightly gripped the glasses his father had been wearing just minutes before.

Grisha's half eaten corpse was laid out in front of the boy who had just inherited the Attack and Founding titan. Eren wobbled to his feet, placing his father's glasses in his pocket as he began to stumble away from his remains. The steam from his titan wafted in his direction, washing Eren in warmth.

"Thank you, father."

Eren gave a solemn farewell to his father and huffed as he willed his legs to move. The titan transformation had left his body weak, but he could manage to make his way back to the refugee camp.

That's right. This future that I'm working for will be different because I'll be changing it with my own hands.

As the now young boy stumbled through the brush, he tripped over a tree root, sending him careening towards the ground.

Shit...

That was Eren's last thought as his senses were robbed from him yet again.

His unconscious body hit the ground with a thud and the sounds of the forest came back ever so slightly as animals which were frightened by the transformation returned. Birds chirped and leaves rustled gently in the wind, softly flowing through Eren's hair.

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Chapter 1 END

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A/N: Hello all. I decided to try out an AOT fic with time travel because the concept of the Paths leaves so much room for creativity. I seriously don't know what the upload schedule will be like for this, so I apologize. That said, I do plan to make chapters fairly longer. I love AOT and there's not a lot of lore to keep up with so that should keep me writing. I hope you enjoy it. Any feedback would be nice. Also let me know if there are grammar mistakes as I do tend to miss some while proofreading.

The Good Doctor

A/N: Hey all, I'm back. First of all, if you didn't see it in the story description, please go check out omarvinillustrations on Instagram. He's an amazing and talented artist who does primarily AOT focused art, but has also done pieces for Berserk, Fate, and many more! Secondly, thanks for the fantastic support on the first chapter. I'm still trying to work out the story right now and I hope you can all bear with me for the inevitable mistakes and hiccups along the way. I'll try to keep my update schedule to once or even maybe twice a month. That being said, I'm aiming for about 8k-10k words a chapter so we'll see how that goes. Thanks for reading and without further adieu, here's the new chapter!

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Chapter 2: The Good Doctor

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As the morning's light had just broken over the walls, a singular beam had snaked its way through the cracks in the makeshift refugee shelter. This particular beam of light had proudly and uncaringly fallen directly onto Eren's eyes. In less than a minute, he found himself being lazily dragged from his slumber and his senses ever so slowly returned to him. His sense of smell came back to him first and the putrid smell of overcrowded and unwashed refugees like himself flooded his nostrils. After that, his hearing returned, and with it came the deafening sounds of chatter, moans, cries, and rustling.

Where...

Just as quickly as the thought entered his mind, Eren jolted awake, his fists balled and his arms cocked back to swing at the nearest target. Everything was blurry and dark so the boy hurriedly rubbed

his eyes to hopefully solve the issue. As he did so, his vision was made clear and he took in the sight of the shelter around him. Dozens of people were laid out on mats, some hurt, others still trying to sleep. The air around him was humid and hot, probably a consequence of the many people packed into such a small building.

As he took in the sight around him, a small hand gently placed itself upon his shoulder. Eren swung his head around with enough force to break his neck. A petite and pale face of worry greeted him. Still in a state of shock, it took Eren a couple of moments before he recognized the figure.

"Mi... kasa?" he rasped.

Her brow furrowed further in worry and Mikasa tilted her head quizzically.

"Yes?" she answered.

Eren only stared back in wonder for a moment more before he continued.

"Where are we? Why are you so you-"

Just as Eren had begun his string of questions, a jolt ran down his spine and a crackle resounded in his ears. The memories of the night before flooded back to him and his memories of the future began to fill in the other blanks.

That's right, I did it. I went back...

His head began to pound and his own thoughts began to echo dully in his brain. Eren rubbed his head absently as the pain began to subside almost immediately as they had come.

Thanks for that. Almost blew it immediately.

That crackle in his ears made it obvious who helped him in that moment, so Eren thanked Ymir in the back of his mind, confident his

thanks would reach her.

Eren took in the scene once more and mused to himself about how long it took Shadis to find him.

"Eren, what were you saying?"

The question snapped Eren back into reality as he focused his attention back to the girl in front of him. Her brow had somehow furrowed even more and both of her hands were on his shoulders at this point, as if to steady him. As Eren stared back into her big, dark eyes, he couldn't help but chuckle.

"Sorry. Had a bad dream. Forget about it," he said dismissively.

Mikasa's brow relaxed and she let her hands fall to her sides. She understood completely. The nightmares were bad for her last night as well. She assumed they would be bad in the beginning, but would soon fade away as new, happier memories were made. The same thing happened when she lost her parents and the Yeagers came into her life. However, the looming threat of titans now made her almost certain the nightmares would come back again someday.

They always did and the cycle would always begin anew. That's what life is like in this world is cruel...

"Ok," answered the girl as she retreated slightly behind her scarf.

Eren sensed her discomfort and unease, deciding to respond in a way to put her at rest.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so touchy. How about we talk outside for now? This place smells like a pig pen."

Mikasa let her scarf fall back down around her neck, a usual sign of surrender to his typical whims, but she was also a little off-put by Eren's calm demeanor. Whatever reservations she had however soon vanished and she took Eren's hand as he helped her to her

feet. He took a moment to stretch and the pair of recently orphaned children bid farewell to the overcrowded and smelly shelter.

As they walked through the archway to the square, the full force of the bright morning sun hit Eren in the face. The same could be said for Mikasa as well, as she shielded her eyes from the harsh rays of golden light. Eren followed suit, doing the same.

Leaving the archway, they fought their way through the crowd in the square. The crowd were people just like them: those who had lost their homes to the man-eating, humanoid monsters from beyond the walls. With Wall Maria lost to their ravenous, giant invaders, the people of Wall Maria sought shelter within Wall Rose. In the time it took for the government to withdraw all citizens back into Wall Rose, an estimated ten thousand had already lost their lives to their century old enemies. Now, those who had once lived comfortably behind Walls Rose and Sina had to share their land with the refugees. Of course, overcrowding and food scarcity quickly became problems.

That leads to the current predicament Eren, Mikasa, Armin, and many others find themselves in within the cramped walls of the Trost District.

"HEY! THIEF! STOP!"

A grizzly voice was heard and a man rushed past Eren and Mikasa. In his arms the man had many loaves of bread, almost quadruple the daily amount rationed out to the refugees. Hot on his tail were three Garrison soldiers. As the young duo watched the scene unfold, a person from within the stuffy crowd stuck their leg out in front of the man, sending him toppling to the ground along with his stolen goods. The loaves of bread bounced and rolled in many directions, all being scooped up in seconds by other desperate citizens. The soldiers caught the original thief and tried to stop the rest of the thieves, to no avail.

"Oh you're gonna get it now jackass!" huffed one of the soldiers.

In an instant, all three soldiers pounced on the man, beating him senseless. Any prior sense of duty to catch and detain him were gone and instead replaced by pure bloodlust as they continued to beat the lanky and matted thief.

The crowd had parted slightly, as if to give the soldiers more room to brutalize the man. No one stepped in to intervene. Why would they anyway? Why risk a beating and getting no rations over someone they didn't even know? This mentality was one shared by the crowd as they listened to sickening, bone-chilling thuds against the thief's now unconscious body. With each thud, it felt as if an eternity had passed and the crowd had long since gone silent to watch the public beating.

Mikasa felt bad for the man of course, but then again, he was the one who got caught. He probably had a good reason for stealing all that food. The thief probably had kids or people he had to take care of, people he would do anything for. Mikasa was the same way. She would do anything for Eren. She had to. She made a promise to Miss Carla...

As Mikasa was brooding over these thoughts, she grew sad. The sight of the man being beat, the memory of Miss Carla, and the fact that she had an empty stomach were souring her mood at an alarming rate. Not wishing for her spirits to decline any further, she spoke to Eren.

"Let's go Eren. Armin and his Grandpa are probably getting food for us right now..."

The sound of fists and boots barreling into the thief continued. A few seconds passed and the sound had not stopped and she had also not received an answer.

"Eren?" questioned the young Mikasa as she turned to where the target of her inquiry had been standing moments before.

Her eyes widened as she realized she was not talking to her adoptive brother, but a small child munching on half a loaf of bread.

"Eren?!" Mikasa asked once more, whipping around in every direction to try to find a glimpse of him. It was then that she noticed the sounds of the man getting beat had ceased. Thanks to the silent crowd, she overheard the soldier speak once again.

"What did you say?"

"You heard me," barked back a young voice.

Oh no.

That was the only thought that crossed Mikasa's mind as she pushed her way through the crowd to where Eren's voice had come from.

"If you keep that up, he's going to die," said the young boy.

The soldier, a middle aged man with greasy, slicked back hair and a thuggish sneer, turned to fully face the child ordering him around.

"You got shit for brains kid? Don't meddle in adult business. Why don't you go back to sucking on your mom's tit?" spat the soldier. The other soldiers both let out obnoxious chuckles, one of them letting his boot rest on the unconscious man's head.

"I couldn't even if I wanted to. She's dead."

When Eren answered, the soldier stiffened a little and let out a groan. Pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration, the soldier continued.

"Look kid. You saw what this guy just did right? He was taking food. OUR food. YOUR food. Get it? You should be thanking us for bringing a menace like that to justice."

The soldier smirked, confident he had achieved victory. Though, he wasn't sure if he should have been proud of winning an argument with a kid...

"Yeah, but he dropped all of it and it got stolen by other people anyway. All I see is you beating a defenseless man to death." Eren responded to the soldier, an icy glare locked onto him.

At this point the soldier was starting to lose patience. He began to wipe the blood on his hands away with a towel, turning to face Eren and stomping towards him.

"Rrrggh! Listen kid, if you know what's good for you, you'll turn around and go back to whatever disease ridden hole you fucking free-loaders crawled out of! I haven't eaten in two days because of the rationing! If it was up to me, I'd throw all of you shits back over the wall. Maybe then, I could get a decent meal!"

The soldier began getting red in the face, his anger becoming ever more present on his face. He had readied his hand to strike the kid, when the impudent brat in front of him spoke once more.

"Are you sure you want to say stuff like that surrounded by a whole bunch of 'free-loaders' as you put it?" snapped the young boy.

The soldier froze and for the first time took the chance to look around him.

The faces of the tired and rugged refugees had collectively begun to judge the soldier. Their scornful glares started burning holes into him, and he could feel the tension in the crowd rising. One of his underlings started tapping him on the shoulder and he was equally as nervous. A few tense seconds passed and the soldier grumbled out a curse before making his way to leave. He gave the thief one last kick and the trio of soldiers fled the scene.

As they left, Eren let out a sigh of relief, thankful he didn't get an ass-whooping like he expected. The crowd soon thereafter began to chat

amongst themselves and go about their business like before and Mikasa was finally able to get to Eren.

"Eren! Why did you..." The young girl began to protest Eren's actions, but she trailed off, once again hiding her face behind the scarf around her neck.

"Everyone's desperate right now Mikasa," sighed Eren. "Also, I really didn't want to have to watch someone get killed right before I get something to eat. This guy probably has people he's trying to protect right now."

As Eren spoke, the man's eyes slowly began to open and his bloody figure slowly rose off the ground. The man clambered to his feet and began to shuffle off before Eren stopped him.

Feeling a tug on his sleeve, the bread thief turned around to face the young boy. Eren opened his coat to reveal a loaf of bread that had fallen to the ground earlier. It was now flattened and covered with dirt, but the boy offered it to the man all the same. His bloody hand reached out and took the loaf, tears forming in his eyes. He turned and left without giving any thanks, but Eren was okay with that.

Mikasa watched the interaction, but her expression was hidden behind her red scarf, making it impossible for Eren to make out what she was thinking. He hated when she did that...

Eren scratched his head apologetically and smiled.

"Sorry, that was kind of reckless."

Mikasa nodded. "Very. If that guard hadn't insulted everyone by accident and then started beating you too, no one would step into help. Well, I would, but still..."

"Yeah," sighed Eren. "Everyone has to fend for themselves now. No one's gonna go out of their way to help some kid with a smart mouth

anymore. It's crazy how much has changed in a few days. I mean, soldiers beating people in the streets, riots, hunger..."

"It's the titans' fault humanity is in this predicament," said Mikasa, her eyes drifting from the crowd to the towering wall in the distance.

"No."

Mikasa's attention snapped back to Eren.

"We can't just blame all of our problems on the titans. We're tearing ourselves apart within these walls and the titans are just watching us do it. It's so sad, it's funny."

Mikasa put her hand on his shoulder as his fists tightened.

Eren felt an anger well up inside of him. He wasn't angry with the titans. He was sick and tired of these damn *walls* . These walls trapped everyone within them and the people had nowhere to run to. These walls used to make people feel comfortable, but now they felt something else entirely. Humanity felt like cattle. The looming dread of the titans breaking in was putting everyone on edge, making them desperate. Eren was sure that if they were given enough time, the Eldians within the walls would kill each other, even without the titans help.

It's the walls' fault that this is all happening. It's because the people don't know that there is a future beyond the walls. There's *freedom* .

As Eren was absorbed in his rage, Mikasa watched in concern, though only partly. To be honest, seeing that rage on Eren's face was the first normal thing she'd seen from him today so far.

Something didn't feel right about Eren...

Just as the two were starting to get too deeply invested in their own thoughts, a familiar voice snapped them back into reality.

"Heeeeeey guys! Grandpa and I got the rations for today!"

The two looked behind them to the source of the sound and found their blonde friend running towards them with three loaves of bread in his arms.

"Oi, Armin!" called Eren with a smile, happy to see his friend. The happy feeling was just as quickly replaced with fear as Eren noticed his clumsy friend heading straight for a crack in the stone paved ground.

Armin kept running forward, unaware of this hidden danger, that is until he felt his entire body fly forwards and his feet leave the ground. In his panic, the young boy let go of the bread, sending it sailing in the air.

Time felt as if it was moving at a snail's pace and Eren felt his stomach drop into his feet, kind of like the first time he went zipping around with his ODM gear. Through his terror, Eren caught a flash of black and red in the corner of his eye, and within a second, his adoptive sister had swiped the precious meal out of the air and clutched the loaves tightly to her chest.

As Armin face planted into the rocky ground with a thud, Eren cheered and slapped Mikasa on the back. The girl handed over the loaves to Armin and Eren with a blush and the trio left the square to find a place to eat. Armin's Grandpa had been following at a distance, but let out a chuckle at the comedic display before returning to munching on his loaf.

The slightly funny event helped to ease the pain of the last few days for everyone, slightly improving the moods of the four refugees.

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From the shadows casted by the wall, a trio not too unlike Eren, Mikasa, and Armin watched in silence as the latter left the square. Resting her back against the cool wall behind her, a young Annie Leonhart munched on her almost stale ration. After the events of the last days, she was beyond worn out. Words couldn't describe the

exhaustion she felt and to top it all off, the meager scraps these devils called food didn't help to satiate her growing hunger. Ever since they stepped foot on this godforsaken island their plan has just kept falling apart more and more.

As she retreated into her thoughts, she continued to chew on her ration, putting up a barrier between the other two of the trio.

Reiner and Bertholdt took notice and decided not to disturb her. Reiner, the blonde and stoic looking leader of the three voiced his displeasure.

"There she goes again. We won't get a damn thing done like this."

"Reiner," the meek Bertholdt whispers back. "We've only just arrived. I think we can rest a bit. Besides, we've all been working ourselves to the bone just to get here."

As Bertholdt's protests leave his lips, Reiner shoots him a glare, sending the former into a complacent silence.

The leader sees the discomfort caused by this and quickly sighs, trying to remedy the atmosphere he himself ruined. Putting a hand on his shoulder, Reiner gives Bertholdt an apologetic look.

"You're right, sorry. Let's take this time to recover from the trip. However, I believe we should still try to formulate some plan. The longer I sit here among these idiots, the more stir crazy I get."

Bertholdt nods, thankful his friend is thinking about his team. "Thanks Reiner. We'll get moving again soon."

The tension between the two disappears, but is replaced when an icy hand slaps onto both of their shoulders. The boys turn around to find Annie giving them an uncaring glare.

"Let's talk then. What kind of grand plan do you have?" she spits.

Reiner feels a lump in his throat beginning to form, but he coughs to clear it before answering.

"Well, it's only been a few days. The King still hasn't done anything yet, so our original plan still stands. We wait to see how he reacts and pull out if we have to. That's all."

This answer didn't seem to be the one Annie was hoping for, as she voices her concerns almost immediately.

"So we just sit on our ass till then?" she snaps.

Bertholdt looks away, fearing the conversation has taken a sharp turn that he doesn't want to be a part of.

"Yeah, that's the best we got until we can blend in a little better. If you don't like it, you're more than free to turn back, though I'm sure the top brass won't be too keen to let you keep that titan."

As the leader barked back at the girl, Bertholdt was struggling to hold back his feelings, but decided against speaking. What did his opinion matter anyway?

When Annie heard that last statement, her demeanor changed slightly but the annoyance was still displayed quite clearly on her face. An uncomfortable silence fell between the trio and no one attempted to break it.

And so, as if nothing had happened to begin with, they all returned to their meals in the shade of the wall.

...

Night had fallen and Eren had long since rested his head against his shabby, straw pillow. As he lay beside Mikasa, he couldn't fall asleep, his mind racing. The relative silence of the shelter at night had given him too much time to think, and the more his mind wandered, the

more he found that sleep would not come. The occasional cries of other refugees and the smell also didn't help.

God, was the smell this bad before?

Once again, Eren's mind was filled with useless thoughts. In truth, he was so confused he couldn't sleep.

He had no plan.

He had gone back in time, but he wasn't sure how to reach the vision of true freedom that he had seen. The things he had done today, like standing up to that guard, or deciding which book to read with Armin had been done on nothing but pure whims.

Another thought which bugged him was the fact that his consciousness was still that of his nineteen year old self. Shouldn't his memories have only been sent back to his past self, not his entire consciousness? If that didn't happen, then what happened to the Eren of the past? Was he simply just gone?

As Eren mulled over these thoughts, he ran his fingers over the thin frames of his father's broken glasses.

What should I do now that I don't have your memories to guide me father?

When this thought crossed his mind, a memory flashed before his very eyes. It was a memory from a lifetime ago. A stoic and caring soldier was helping him to his feet as Eren had tears in his eyes. The older brother figure gave him a reassuring smile before saying something.

That's right... what kind of bullshit am I asking myself? I always had my answer...

Keep moving forward.

That was the only thing that Eren could do.

His mind had calmed down somewhat and Eren placed the memento of his father safely back into his pocket. With his new objective in his mind, Eren found himself drifting off to sleep. A sense of peace washed over him as he listened to Mikasa's soft breaths next to his ear and the darkness took him.

...

...

...

...

I gotta piss...

The thought brought Eren back to the realm of consciousness as he felt a heavy weight on his bladder.

Being careful not to wake anyone next to him, Eren rose to his feet and tiptoed around the rows of sleeping refugees to make his way to the public restrooms next to the shelter. As he passed the threshold of the archway which led to the square, he took a sharp right letting his feet carry him down the dimly lit passageway. A cool wind brushed past him, making Eren shiver slightly. He made a note to get something to keep him warm if this trend of nightly excursions were to continue. Maybe he could snag Mikasa's scarf if push came to shove...

Nah, he wouldn't be that desperate.

The dimly lit passageway opened up to reveal a courtyard bathed in moonlight. Within the courtyard were many benches and stands to sell goods. Eren could imagine the hustle and bustle of the place before the fall of the walls. Children would be sitting and playing with each other as parents would do their shopping, the parents keeping a vigilant, but happy gaze transfixed on the kids. Old couples would be walking through and occasionally stopping to bask in the sunlight

while resting on the stone benches. The only thing missing would be some ice cream. God, how Eren missed ice cream.

However, with the ever-looming threat of the titans on their doorstep, humanity wouldn't be able to enjoy such simple things anymore. The children wouldn't play and the parents wouldn't bring them out to shop with them. Hell, they'd be lucky if they could do any shopping considering the alarmingly large increase in poverty sweeping across the walls. Couples would walk through this place, the memories of happier times crossing their minds as they turned to where their partner had once been, but only finding empty air.

With a sigh, Eren pulled his coat closer to him as the air became ever so slightly colder.

He approached the public restrooms, a hastily built and cramped building. As he stepped inside, an even fouler stench than that of the refugee camp assaulted his nose. He was pretty sure no one took the time to clean the place. His theory was pretty much proven instantly as he eyed the copious amounts of human bodily fluids and waste within a stall.

With a tiny bit of hesitation, Eren took a deep breath and went in, hoping he could hold his breath for the duration of his visit.

He barely made it and ducked out of the building as fast as he could, unable to even wash his hands.

"Man, I really did take a lot of stuff for granted in those four years. They don't even have a basin or soap!" Eren mumbled this to himself as he shut the door to the restrooms, thinking of the years where the walls underwent such technological and sanitary advancements.

Sleepily, he let out a yawn and scratched the back of his head. As Eren went to open his eyes, he abruptly bumped into something. The weighty obstacle forced Eren's small frame off his feet and onto the ground.

Groaning in pain, the young boy looked up at whatever he had walked into to find none other than the trio of soldiers from earlier that day, and they didn't look all that sober.

Shit...

That was the only thought that crossed the boy's mind as he crawled back to his feet.

"Hey! We thought that waz you kid!" The leader grumbled out, which was abruptly followed by a guttural belch. Eren could smell the alcohol on them from where he was several feet away.

One of the lackeys took a swig from his flask and handed it to the leader who did the same. Running a hand through his greasy hair, the leader threw the flask back to his subordinate before kneeling down to eye level with Eren.

"Jus tha guy we waz lookin fer!" slurred the soldier.

Panic set into the young boy as the leader took a handful of Eren's hair and yanked him towards the group. There was no way he could take these guys right now, even if they were drunk, and that's not even factoring in the size difference.

"Hey! Cut it out you drunkard!" growled Eren, but his tiny, ten year old body couldn't do much to resist except scratching and kicking.

"Jeez, you jus love lookin down on us adults huh? You embarrassed tha hell outta us today! Time for you to take..."

The soldier reared back his leg and delivered a sloppy, yet sturdy kick to Eren's abdomen. This sent the child careening to the ground and he instantly curled up to protect his vitals.

" *Shit! This damn body!*" cursed Eren mentally as he fought the urge to instantly vomit.

"Responsibility!"

As the leader finished his line, he sent another kick, this time aiming for the young child's ribs.

An audible crack resounded through the courtyard and Eren felt his lungs deflate, refusing to take any air back in. The lack of oxygen instantly made his vision darken, but the barrage of attacks had only just begun.

Within seconds, the other two soldiers joined in, stomping Eren's back and head.

"Come on boy! Where's yer courage now?!"

When Eren didn't answer his attacker, the assault became even more violent.

"Answer me you little shit!" barked the leader, spraying spittle on the young victim's face.

With each second that Eren didn't answer, the barrage of kicks only worsened. He had long since lost the feeling in his legs and Eren wasn't even sure if he could remember how to walk at this point. As the kicks kept coming, each impact rattled his bones and he could swear it felt like his brain had done a backflip. The world was spinning and the moon which had once loomed over him had started darting back and forth in the sky.

He wasn't sure how long the encounter had been going on at this point, but he soon felt a tiny bit of relief as the two lackeys ceased their attack, obviously satisfied with the damage done. However, that didn't stop the leader who had, in his rage, continued to utter curses and grunts with each kick.

"Hey, boss. I think he's had enough..." muttered one soldier in an uncomfortable tone.

"Yeah, you'll kill him," oinked the other soldier.

Eren could only faintly hear their voices now, the world turning dark.

The leader stopped and turned to his lackeys, wiping the sweat off of his brow.

"Ya think I care? One less mouth to feed! Besides, there isn't anyone who would even miss the little shit!"

"OH YEAH?"

As the drunken leader uttered the final word of his sentence, a booming, but familiar voice countered his opinion, and a loud crunch echoed through the square.

The sounds of a struggle made its way to Eren's ears, but his body had long since given up on the idea of staying conscious. As Eren drifted off to sleep, he wearily reminded himself to train his body a little more this time around.

...

A warm breeze washed over Eren and sunlight flooded his vision. The breeze carried with it the scent of pastures and dirt, with a hint of water thrown in somewhere. He knew this smell very well.

It was the smell of home.

As his eyes cracked open, Eren noticed a dull throb in the back of his head and everywhere on his face. The sound of rushing water resounded in his right ear. He felt cold stone beneath his body, but his head was resting on something soft and warm. His vision which had been white slowly started to clear up and he could make out the face of a young girl looking down at him. Her face was half obscured by a red scarf and her big, dark eyes bored into him. It was Mikasa.

Eren shifted his head slightly and her long hair tickled his nose, causing Eren to rub it instinctively. This caused an immense pain to take hold of his nose and Eren winced.

At the sight of his discomfort, Mikasa took hold of his wrist and gently placed his hand back down by his side.

"The bleeding just stopped, you shouldn't touch it just yet," Mikasa calmly scolded.

"Bleeding?" Eren echoed, confused.

"Yeah, we both got it good this time Eren. Did they hit you that hard?"

A new voice made itself present and Eren instantly knew who it was.

Eren turned his head to the right, spying Armin nursing his own wounds on the steps by the canal.

"Did they get you too Armin? It was you who jumped in at the last second?" asked Eren as he rubbed his face absentmindedly.

Armin turns more towards Eren, a confused, but also amused look on his face.

"Ha, I wish! Seriously, they really hit you hard huh? You've been out for a while," Armin chuckled to himself, but his gaze soon turned down to the ground beneath him. He ran his finger through a crack in the stone floor and continued.

"No, it was you two who saved me. It's always you two."

Armin's gaze turned to that of sadness rather quickly, Eren taking notice. Whatever concern he had for his friend though was soon overcome by a sense of confusion.

"Wait, then who saved me from those drunks?" asked Eren.

Mikasa took a recently bloodied handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed Eren's nose gently as his wound began to bleed again. As she did this, the young girl took her turn to question the confused boy.

"Dunks? What do you mean? Those guys are our age. They can't drink."

"Yeah, I bet those bullies wish they could drink," giggled Armin who exchanged an amused smirk with Mikasa.

This only confused Eren more and he abruptly sat up, a new wave of pain washing over him. He properly took in his surroundings for the first time. When he turned his head, Eren's stomach dropped when he recognized where he was.

Shiganshina.

"HUH?!"

Eren gasped, clearly confused, and scrambled to his feet. He spun in every direction, confirming his surroundings. It took seconds to identify it.

It was the same walls, the same belltower in that direction, the same homes across the canal they always used to sit by with the same mothers always outside doing laundry.

This was it.

This was home.

The breeze's scent hadn't lied to him.

Did I go back again? Did Ymir bring me back further in time? Wait, that's not possible. I don't even have the Attack Titan yet...

He felt a tug on his sleeve and Eren whipped his head to the direction of Mikasa who looked at him in concern.

She was different now though. He craned his neck up to her and she was older, greatly so. Her hair was short like his, and a long scar had adorned her right cheek.

No longer was she the shy young girl hiding behind her scarf. She was the confident and strikingly beautiful young woman that Eren had grown to know in the last years of his old life.

"I said you shouldn't move yet," she muttered, mildly annoyed.

Eren backed away from her, startled, but he bumped into something while doing so. A pair of arms seized his and painfully twisted them behind his back.

As Eren struggled with the unseen force, he was able to make out that it was Armin, still a young boy.

"Armin? What are you doing?" rasped Eren as he struggled with the pain the other young boy was causing him. He twisted his arms every which way to regain freedom in his now trapped limbs. Try as he might however, Eren couldn't break free from Armin's normally weak grasp.

The sound of an unsheathed sword brought Eren's attention back to Mikasa. She now had her ODM gear and had taken one of the silver blades out, readying it to strike with a frown on her face.

The wind picked up and grew hotter and hotter to the point where it was akin to that of titan steam. His hair whipped around him and Eren only panicked more.

"Mikasa! Wait! What's happening? Armin?!" the boy cried, unable to do anything.

The sky reddened and the water had stopped flowing despite the rushing wind around them. Cracks snaked their way across the walls in the distance and they began to crumble ever so slowly, revealing the hidden giants within.

The familiar scenery he had known in his childhood began to crumble away, but he wasn't as affected by it as one would think.

Eren had already watched his home be destroyed so many times already...

As the carnage unfolded around him, Eren felt Armin's grip on him tighten and his childhood friend brought his lips close to Eren's ear.

"Someone who can't sacrifice anything, can never change anything," whispered Eren's childhood friend.

A shiver ran up Eren's spine and he heard the sound of footsteps rushing towards him. He spun his head to face Mikasa who was sprinting towards him, her blade ready to swing. She smiled slightly as she executed a horizontal slash.

"See you later Eren..."

Eren felt his head separate from his neck and then he felt nothing.

...

"How is that possible?"

"I'm not sure Doc. Like I said, I'm fairly certain his bones were broken."

Voices circled around in Eren's mind and he opened his eyes from the nightmare he had just experienced. Sweat and blood had made his clothes cling to him uncomfortably and his heartbeat and breathing were erratic.

"You must've been mistaken. He's perfectly fine save for a few bruises and a slight concussion."

"But I'm pretty sure-"

"You haven't hit the bottle today right Hannes?"

"Please, if I had been drinking, I would've been able to take those guys without so much as a scratch on me."

The other voice let out a chuckle, clearly amused by the former's statement.

When he opened his eyes, the scene of a room flooded Eren's vision and the strong smell of antiseptics burned his nostrils. As Eren laid in a semi-comfortable bed, he spied multiple tools and instruments adorning the walls along with cabinets filled to the brim with bottles, concoctions, and remedies.

This was a doctor's office.

If it wasn't for all of the equipment here, Eren still would've been able to deduce as much based on the smell of the room alone. His father was a doctor so he knew the smell very well.

"Oh? He's up already?"

Eren's attention locked onto the origin of the voice and he was met by an unfamiliar face.

Eren's gaze was fixed on the tired, dark brown eyes of an older man. His face was slender and sunken slightly, his skinniness even more apparent as Eren noticed how loosely his clothes hung around him. The man's nose was hooked and large, but it wasn't the most prominent feature on his face. That award was given to the large cut which snaked its way around the left side of his shaven head. It was healing, but still very evidently fresh.

The man noticed the battered boy staring at his wound and he turned his head slightly, obviously not used to the attention it would garner. He scratched at the light patch of hair on his chin and held out his hand to greet the boy.

It shook slightly.

"Name's Penn Shultz. I'm a doctor," he coughed.

Eren took the man's shaking hand with his own tiny one and nodded, confirming their introductions when Eren stated his own name.

"I'm Eren. Eren Yeager."

"Yeah, I know," stated Shultz with a hint of apathy.

Eren furrowed his brow, unsure of how to handle the doctor. A couple moments of silence passed, an uncomfortable couple of moments at that. Sensing the awkwardness, a familiar face snapped into view.

"How are you feeling Eren?"

Eren focused his attention on a face he hadn't seen in a long time.

It was Hannes, alive and well and actually sober surprisingly.

His golden eyes warmly greeted Eren along with his signature smirk. He and his childhood friends had always been greeted with that smile. It didn't occur to Eren how much he had missed it until he had seen it again.

"Hannes? What are you doing here?"

"Ha, I'm your savior kid. I brought you here after I found those thugs beating up on you."

As Hannes spoke, Eren noticed the many bruises and scrapes which the older man had all over him. He had undoubtedly gotten those in his tussle with the soldiers from earlier.

"I see..."

The young, injured boy answers half heartedly, too absorbed in his thoughts about the past and his own emotions.

"Eren?" Hannes asks, a look of concern forming on his face.

"Ah, yeah, I'm fine. Sorry." Hannes' display of worry snaps Eren back to reality and he answers him confidently this time, though he's not too sure what to say afterwards.

That scene of Hannes being eaten alive keeps replaying in Eren's mind.

"Looks like you just saw a ghost. I know you just got the shit beat outta you, but are you sure you're okay?" The blonde man asks him the same question and Eren feverishly nods, as if not to worry him any further.

"Yeah," stated the young boy as he stared at his hands in his lap. "I'm just beat the hell up. Those guys did a number on me."

The candle which sat on a nearby table flickered slightly, casting a shadow on the faces of Shultz and Hannes.

The older Garrison soldier lets out a low growl. "Beating up on a kid," he seethes. "What kinda soldiers are they? I'm going to have to find their captain later..."

Eren rubs his aching side. The rib which had been snapped earlier had mended itself back in place in a matter of... wait... how long was he out?

"Hey Hannes, how long has it been since then?"

Hannes' face scrunches up and he looks up at the ceiling as he thinks. "Ehhh, maybe an hour. Maybe two. I wasn't keeping track."

"Considering you said it took you twenty minutes to get here Hannes, and the fact that you two have been here for an hour already, you've been out for about an hour and half boy. Give or take of course"

The doctor spoke up, inserting himself into the conversation. Eren had almost completely forgotten he was there. The doctor seemed to

like to keep to himself unless he deemed it necessary to speak. Eren's deduction of Shultz seemed spot on as soon as the latter returned his attention back to a faded notebook in his lap. He seemed to be taking notes.

"Jeez, it's already been that long?" asked Hannes dumbfoundedly, taking the moment of surprise to massage his swollen cheek. "We should be getting you back to the shelter Eren. What were you even doing out that late by yourself?"

Eren swung his legs over the side of the bed, his whole body aching, but not anywhere near as damaged as it should be. Sometimes it paid to be a titan shifter.

"I had to piss. Thought it would've been obvious since I was outside the toilets," Eren grumbled.

"Oh, well excuuuuuse me. Just when I had started to think they knocked that bad attitude outta you, my expectations were crushed," Hannes retorted with his smirk now fully and obnoxiously displayed.

In the midst of the duo's banter, the outsider cleared his throat, drawing all focus on himself. The doctor got up from his seat beside Eren's bed, tucked his notebook into his coat, and patted the young boy on the shoulder.

"Well, there shouldn't be any more problems. Your body heals well. Take care and come back if you need anything." The doctor's brown eyes bored into Eren as he spoke and he let his gaze wander on the boy's injuries a moment longer. Eren sat there uncomfortably before Shultz finally left the room, the echo of footsteps retreating upstairs.

"He's a bit of an oddball. Always has been, but he's a good doctor. Reminds me a lot of your father." As Hannes said this, a sense of nostalgia washed over Eren and he ran his fingers over the frames of his father's glasses.

"Yeah, he doesn't seem like a bad guy," Eren muses.

The pair stood up and both took a few seconds to put their coats on before making their way out of the room and towards the front door. As they were exiting, the doctor's voice echoed down the stairs.

"I'll be closing up soon, so turn the sign over!"

Hannes did so without much protest, at least audibly anyways, and the pair were confronted by the chilly, night air.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, Hannes broke the silence.

"Remember the way here. Never know when you'll get your ass handed to you again."

Eren nodded and brought his coat closer to his body, trying to fend off the cool night air. The walls loomed in the distance, making Eren feel a tiny bit uncomfortable.

"Oh yeah," Hannes continued. "Try not to interrupt his lunch either. The guy gets real uppity about it. He lives on the second floor and the clinic is on the first, so you'll know if he's on break if he isn't in the clinic when you get there."

The two of them walked in unison under the starry sky and Eren continued staring at the oppressive, large, stone walls.

"Gotcha," the boy answered.

"As long as you understand..." Hannes trailed off, unsure of what to say next.

The two walked in silence for a minute or so, the sound of their footsteps echoing in the night.

The district was basically dead at night, at least when you're this far out from the center. The doctor's clinic was fairly far from the heart of the district, but not close to the wall. According to Hannes, the walk was a decently long one back to the shelter. Considering it took him

twenty minutes to get to the clinic while sprinting with a child in his arms, Eren had a light exercise cut out for him.

He didn't mind though. The night sky was always so calming, even within these drab walls.

When he stared at the night sky, his mind would always wander. Sometimes it brought him to happy times, other times he revisited dark memories. Sometimes Eren would think about useless things like how old a tree was. The night sky truly did make him think about odd things.

This time, the memories of "that day" flooded back to Eren. He was certain it was because of the company he had with him at the moment.

Eren's thoughts were filled with the imagery of the day the walls fell.

The carnage, the horror, the panic.

Ruined homes, ruined lives.

Death and destruction.

Mom.

The young boy's expression darkened slightly at the thought of his mother.

What would you think of what I'm doing mom?

I avoided the rumbling for now, so I guess I'm doing the right thing, but how do I change things for the better? I'll just keep moving forward until I find the answer, but I wonder if my answer is one you would approve of...

I have to do what's best for the people of Paradis, but I'm sure you wouldn't want your death to be used as motivation for what I would have to do.

Being here, in this time, your death being recent... I guess it's got me more emotional than usual. It's relatively peaceful now, so I guess I can afford to be a little emotional...

The boy's face turned slightly red, a pain in his chest bringing him almost to tears.

I haven't changed one bit... I'm still the same crybaby that I was back then. I'm still the same slave to circumstance...

I didn't want to fight Armin.

I didn't want to hurt Mikasa's feelings.

I just wanted them to forget about me so that my death wouldn't hurt them.

I didn't want Sasha to die.

I didn't want to betray everyone.

I didn't want to kill all of those innocent people.

How could anyone have wanted to do those horrible things?

Eren's fist tightens, a slight growl coming from his mouth.

I wanted those things.

That's right.

I swore I would kill all of those animals on "that day," and the things that happened were the consequences of my wish.

I technically wanted this from the very beginning...

"Hey kid, are you all right?"

A familiar and friendly voice rips Eren from his dark thoughts. It was Hannes.

"Yeah, just thinking about that day. My mind always wanders at night, sometimes to things I don't like." The young boy answers, a single tear falling from his face which he quickly wiped away.

It's now Hannes' turn for his expression to sour, and it does.

"I'm sorry. I've been thinking about it a lot too. I'm so sorry. If I wasn't such a coward, your mom..." Hannes trails off, his voice dying in his throat and his face scrunching up in discomfort.

"It's not your fault Hannes."

"Huh?"

A cricket chirps somewhere off to their left and silence falls around the pair once more.

Hannes' surprise can't be hidden and the boy looks him in the eyes for the first time since they left the clinic.

"I don't blame you. It's not your fault. I understand." Eren speaks confidently, but warmly.

This is something I should've said to him a long time ago .

"But-but-" Hannes stutters. "You have every right to be angry. Your mother died because I was a coward."

An overwhelming sense of sadness washes over Eren as he watches as the man basically begs the young boy to be mad at him. Hannes feels he should be punished, but Eren wasn't about to grant his wish.

"No, my mother died because titans broke through the walls. It wasn't your fault. So, I forgive you Hannes. You don't have to keep

worrying about something like that. Besides..." Eren trails off for a second before continuing.

"It must've been painful for you too, right?"

The wind blows and whips around the two at Eren's question, as if it wanted to know the answer to the young boy's question too.

The older man's shoulders relax slightly and tears well up in his eyes.

"Yeah, it hurt a lot. I... I didn't want to leave her! Her and your father were great friends!" The blonde man begins to cry, stopping in his tracks and collapsing to his knees in the stone street. He's tightly gripping his own wrist, as if remembering something only he could remember.

Eren turns back to the man and places a small hand upon his shaking shoulder. It was the only other comfort the boy could give the soldier.

"I'm sure. No one could have done anything in that situation. I forgive you Hannes."

The man continued to cry, disbelief and pain gripping him tightly. It's like his emotions were wringing him out like a towel, forcing him to cry. The sobs only grew and the only words Eren could make out through them were small "thank you's."

"To show such a thing to a kid. God, I'm pathetic." Hannes cried.

Eren smiled and patted him on the shoulder.

"You're not pathetic Hannes. You saved Mikasa and I that day. I don't think you're unsightly or anything like that. Let's just chalk it up to the night sky. It can make anyone do something odd."

"Yeah..." Hannes sniffled.

And so, bathed in the moonlight, the two stayed there for a couple of minutes as they reconciled their own shortcomings. When Hannes' sobs turned into sniffles and he finally stood up, the two continued on their journey back to the shelter. The older was clearly a little embarrassed at his emotional outburst, but Eren didn't show any hint of judgement.

Their walk turned into silence once more, but it was now a more comfortable one and as they reached the shelter, Eren bid farewell to his friend.

He snuck through the rows of refugees and laid back down next to Mikasa, who was none the wiser to what had occurred as she slept.

...

After the incident with the soldiers, Eren never had any problem with them again. Hannes must have tracked them down and gotten them discharged. Life continued like normal, or at least as normal as it could have been with the children now living as refugees.

Eren, Mikasa, Armin, and Armin's grandfather spent the next few months doing what almost every other refugee did: hard labor. The refugee's were put to work by the government to earn their keep. With the loss of about thirty percent of their territory, the people of the walls needed to up the production of such things like food and medicine. Many fields were erected within the walls to meet demands for food, but the staggering loss of fertile lands to the titans definitely put a damper on their progress. The group had been participating in mostly manual labor dependent tasks like construction and tending fields. Man, woman, and child alike all had their roles to fill now.

Eren didn't mind the labor, it gave him the chance to strengthen his body. Likewise, Mikasa didn't mind either, as long as she was with Eren in case he hurt himself. Armin had the toughest time out of all of them though, his weak body protesting with every swing of a hoe or lifting of a sack.

Summer turned to fall, the nights becoming even chillier than before. Much to Eren's dread, getting warmer clothes proved just as difficult as in his previous timeline. The influx of cooler weather proved to be deadlier than most thought with most refugees succumbing to sickness and malnourishment. The trio always had food to eat thanks to Armin's grandfather's pleas with the food distribution centers, but sickness was always a factor.

Eren was sure his titan abilities would keep him healthy, at least for the most part, but he worried constantly for his friends, especially Armin. It was an absolute miracle Armin was able to graduate with his physical scores when they entered the 104th.

Eren hadn't seen Hannes in the months since the incident at night, but he was sure the older Garrison soldier was doing fine amidst the chaos.

It was a day like any other, Eren was digging out stumps in the ground to make way for new wheat fields to be erected. With each thrust of his shovel into the ground, Eren's body groaned in protest. He was almost eleven, but was doing the job of an adult and his body was definitely feeling the strain. Day in and day out he worked, and he could feel his body's stamina and strength increase ever so slightly. He would definitely have no problem passing the Cadet Corps' preliminary training.

The cool autumn air did a great job of regulating his body temperatures, but the sweating definitely made it uncomfortable. His clothes clung to him in awkward places because of the sweat and his hair was plastered to his forehead. He let out a strained grunt as he pulled the stump and its roots up from the ground.

That makes three out of...

He looks down the rows of stumps awaiting his expert removal.

... a lot...

Eren let out a groan and continued to the next stump.

The last time I worked this hard was when we were making the railroad.

As he reminisced about the past, well technically the future, a smile formed on his face.

They had all worked really hard to finish that damn thing, day in and day out. Eren, Mikasa, Armin, Jean, Connie, and Sasha all worked hard on it. The Captain and Hange would help occasionally, but would mostly supervise, so it was pretty much just us 104th graduates doing the hard job. It was during that blisteringly hot summer and it would take all of Eren's strength not to collapse from the heat.

Now that I think about it, how can I withstand the strain and heat of being inside a titan body for extended periods of time, but not the sun?

The boy chuckles at the thought and returns his attention to the task at hand.

We'll definitely experience those peaceful times again. I'm sure of it.

With a newfound vigor, Eren thrusts the shovel into the ground, wiggling it around to gain leverage on the stump. He continues this task for an uncertain amount of time before being interrupted by a panicked voice.

"Eren!"

The boy spins his head around to see a sight he was dreading would happen eventually.

It was Mikasa, her scarf wrapped snugly around her face. As she got closer, Eren noticed she was carrying something over shoulder and

as she got even closer he recognized what it was. It was Armin, his body limp and his breaths ragged.

Eren drops his shovel and rushes to meet Mikasa halfway, taking care not to slip into one of the holes in the ground where the stumps once were.

"Mikasa, what happened?!"

The girl finally reaches him and carefully throws the unconscious boy over her shoulder and into Eren's arms. When the boy makes contact with his childhood friend's skin, he gasps.

Shit, Armin's burning up!

"He was carrying some materials back to the storehouse when he just collapsed! I can't find Mr. Arlert either!" she said, the panic in her voice growing.

"Damn, he needs a doctor!" Eren begins to panic. They were past the inner gate and quite far from any clinics in the Trost district. The closest doctor was...

Shultz!

Eren scoops Armin's light body up into his arms.

"I know a doctor in Trost! It'll take a while, but he's the closest option that I know of! Let's hope he's not on his lunch break!"

Mikasa nods, a little confused because of that last part, but follows Eren nonetheless. The two sprint off towards the inner gates, leaving their unfinished work behind.

...

"Thank you so much Doctor, I don't know what we would've done without you!"

Penn Shultz waves away the praise as if it were nothing. He didn't like it all that much considering he was a second-rate doctor at best...

"I didn't do much Mrs. Johann. Just make sure he gets rest," the doctor sighed and scribbled something down in his notebook.

Ida Johann nodded enthusiastically, tears in her eyes. She helped her husband up and took care not to even slightly touch his recently set arm. With her husband's arm injured, they definitely will have it hard till he heals since he can't work like this, but that was okay.

As long as we have each other, we'll be okay.

Her thoughts are filled with only love for her husband and appreciation for the doctor. The time to worry about expenses would come later...

"I'll do just that! Again, thank you! About payment-" Mrs. Johann begins.

"Just mail me whatever you can spare," the doctor coughs. His dark brown eyes focus on his work next to him and he basically shuts down any further conversation with his patient's wife.

"I-I understand," says the thankful woman. She was a bit put off by his attitude, but in her mind she knew that he actually did care about his patients.

If he didn't care, he wouldn't be a doctor. Then again, he can have a little tact...

Mrs. Johann's thoughts seem to somehow telepathically resonate with Shultz as he thinks about the gruff delivery of that last line.

"Sorry, I haven't eaten yet. I become a little irritable when I don't have lunch," apologizes the doctor.

Mrs. Johann waves away his apology, having not taken offense to his attitude in the first place.

"Doc, we really are grateful."

Mr. Johann speaks for the first time since entering the clinic, that is if you don't count grunts of pain as speaking. Mr. Johann stands up and winces as his arm brushes up against his leg, but he maintains his eye contact with the doctor.

With a sigh, the doctor smiles slightly.

"Don't mention it. Just rest. Come back if you need to."

The couple exchange some more lines of gratitude with the doctor and finally take their leave. The clinic was now empty and Shultz let out a long sigh, happy to finally be able to take a break. Shultz closes his notebook with a dramatic slam and then hastily buries it into his coat pocket. He scratches his long nose and stands up, stretching as he does so.

Finally! I can get some peace and quiet while I eat!

The good doctor makes his way out of the examination room and into the hallway, stomping his way up the stairs as he hungrily licks his lips. As he reaches the second floor, he glides his hand along the railing and proceeds to his kitchen. He had made sure to keep some bread warm in the oven and had put some tea on the stove. As he did so, he noticed his reflection on the stained kettle.

The slightly skewed visage that greeted him was one that he was starting to get used to. His face had sunken considerably since Wall Maria fell and his entire body had been reduced to skin and bones. The lack of sleep was apparent on his face, his eyes dark and swollen. Shultz turned his head slightly and ran his hand over the scar which he now sported on the side of his head. It had done a good job healing, but his heart had a harder time doing so.

That scar made it impossible for his heart to heal...

As the hungry doctor took the hissing kettle off the fire, his hand began to violently shake.

Shit! Not again!

He quickly grabbed his shaking hand with his good one and shuffled over to the table before he spilled the boiling contents of the kettle all over the floor. The hissing of the kettle did nothing to settle his nerves as he tried to breathe slowly and calm down.

It'll pass. It'll pass. Just gotta calm down...

The doctor hastily let these thoughts overtake his mind, a vain attempt to settle the seizing in his hand and mind.

Gotta... fix it. Where are they?

Shultz plunged his hands into his pockets, fishing around for something. Relief washes over him as he runs his finger over a small, round object. Retrieving the item from his pockets, the doctor looks over the now revealed to be pill and hastily shoves it into his mouth.

It rolls around in his mouth before Shultz forces it down his throat with a greedy gulp.

It took a minute or two, but the doctor's hand slowly began to steady and he started to think clearly again. He slumps down into the chair next to his table and takes deep, pained breaths.

It's getting worse.

A shudder runs down the doctor's spine as he pushes the thought out of his mind and tries to focus on his meal in front of him. He carefully pours himself a cup of tea and gulps it down, savoring the earthy flavor.

Sweat drips off of his long nose and into the now empty cup. Shultz takes the opportunity to wipe his face with the sleeve of his shirt. He knew it wasn't a very sanitary thing to do, being a doctor and all, but he couldn't care less at the moment.

He shakily got to his feet and retrieved the warm bread from the oven, savoring the amazing smell wafting through his kitchen. He sets the loaf down and slices it, taking care not to make the slice too thick or too thin. He was very particular about it, but Helga had always gotten it right.

...

Oh Walls, he missed her.

A deep sadness took hold in his chest and he could feel the tears welling up in the back of his eyes. Instantly, the doctor pushed all thoughts of her away, trying to keep the time he had for a break relatively happy.

He hated pushing her away like that, but Shultz couldn't handle the thought of her. He felt as if his heart would shatter.

In an attempt to distract himself, the doctor took a jar of jelly, quickly twisting it open and plunging a knife into it. When he pulled the knife out and confirmed the amount of jelly was satisfactory, he slapped it onto the slice of bread and spread it around carefully.

The growl of his stomach was only growing louder and he opened his watering mouth in anticipation of the sweet treat...

Only to be interrupted by the sound of his clinic door bursting open and a child's voice calling for him.

Arghhh, DAMMIT!

Shultz flew out of his seat and raced out of his kitchen, eager to verbally berate anyone who would interrupt his lunch.

You're gonna get it now!

...

As soon as he slammed open the door and called for the doctor, Eren noticed that the examination room was empty and that no one was at the front desk.

Uh oh.

"Hey Mikasa," Eren whispered in a panicked tone.

The girl turned her attention to her adoptive brother, staring blankly into his eyes as she awaited his question.

"What time is it?"

The young girl cocked her head to the side in confusion.

"Right about lunch time I think," answered the girl, unsure of where Eren was going with this.

The young boy gripped Armin a little tighter, a nauseating feeling beginning to make its home in the pit of his stomach.

"Shit..."

That was the only word the boy could say before the skinny and sickly form of Doctor Shultz could be seen stomping down the stairs.

"Now, I know I forgot to turn the sign to closed, but it's just common sense that someone would be having LUNCH at LUNCH TIME don't you think?"

The doctor's irate tirade continued, and Eren surmised that he was probably too mad to take the chance to see who he was yelling at.

"I mean COME ON! I'm open to almost midnight every night, so at least give me SOME kinda break! I mean, seriously! Who... would

do... such a..."

The doctor's rant came to halt as he studied the three children and recognized who it was that he was yelling at.

"..thing.."

Eren looked the doctor in the eyes.

"Doctor Shultz, help him," pleaded Eren.

Almost immediately, the fury on the doctor's face disappeared and urgency replaced it. He raced towards the young boy with his unconscious friend in his arms and quickly scooped him up. With Armin in his arms, the doctor spun around and headed straight for the examination room. Mikasa and Eren followed suit.

"What happened?" questioned the doctor as he levelled a stethoscope to Armin's chest.

"Mikasa said he collapsed while lifting something. He won't even answer us," blurted Eren, the sound of concern snaking its way into his voice.

The doctor continued to study Armin's heartbeat before continuing.

"He's burning up and his heartbeat's a little irregular. His breathing is erratic as well."

Shultz let the stethoscope fall around his neck, producing his notebook from seemingly thin air. He scribbled down a few notes, and looked at Eren and Mikasa.

"He'll be okay. I can tell you that now."

The doctor's quick diagnosis puzzled Eren, so he questioned him.

"How can you tell already?"

The doctor produced a large bowl from under one of the beds and shoved it into Mikasa's arms.

"Go get some water from the well outside," ordered Shultz. He then turned around as Mikasa left and resumed his study of Armin.

Just when Eren felt like he was getting ignored, the doctor spoke up.

"It's overwork," he stated in an apathetic voice. "I've seen so many people like this lately. The fever is a bit worrying though. We have to keep it in check."

A feeling of unease overcame Eren as he thought about the whole situation. All of the refugees were being worked to the bone and dropping like flies. It was only getting worse too. The people in the walls would soon not be able to live off of the meager scraps that the government was handing out.

Those damn bastards in the inner walls are keeping themselves fat and happy while we suffer out here!

The thought made Eren burn with rage.

Just before he could get consumed with rage though, Eren heard Mikasa running down the hallway with a bowl full of fresh, cold water. She was also skillfully careful not to spill any water while running full speed.

"Ackermans sure are scary," mumbled Eren as she handed the bowl off to Shultz.

"Thank you my dear."

The long nosed doctor thanked her and then plunged a towel into the cold water, taking care to thoroughly ring it out. He then placed the cool towel on Armin's sweaty forehead.

The two young children watched in silence as the doctor tended to their ill friend. They stayed like that for what felt like hours, just

watching the pallid doctor work.

After a while, Shultz stood up and ushered the children out of the examination room.

"So Doc?" asked Eren.

"So what?" the doctor answered seriously.

"Is he gonna wake up or anything like that soon?!" shouted Eren, starting to get annoyed with the doctor's apathetic responses.

"Oh," sighed Shultz, not used to anyone raising their voice to him. "Yeah, give him a couple days of rest. He'll be right as rain. That fever's gotta break first though."

The two young children visibly deflated, most of their worries being dispelled for the most part.

"Thank you Doc," sighed Eren as he felt at ease for the first time since entering the clinic.

"Don't mention it. It's my job. Where's his guardian?" the doctor asks as he scribbled some more things down in his notebook.

"Ah, we think he's somewhere in the fields. It's Armin's grandfather. He takes care of all of us," answered Mikasa.

Shultz's eyebrows perk up a bit, but he doesn't probe any further into their circumstances. He figures the old coot who cares for them will tell him their life stories anyway. The doctor always got some of the juiciest gossip from his patients' guardians.

"Get him here. He needs to know what's going on. I'll look after the boy in the meantime."

The doctor says this without looking up from his notebook and the pair of children just nod in agreement. As they leave, the door slams shut, and the clinic is silent once again.

Shultz stows his notebook away for safekeeping, and peeks his head into the examination room to make sure his patient is still okay. As he does so, his stomach audibly growls.

Shit. The bread's probably cold by now.

The hungry, sickly looking doctor sluggishly makes his way up the stairs, thoroughly aggravated due to his lunch being ruined.

...

Eren spent his afternoon seated with Mikasa next to Armin's bed. His fever had gone down slightly and he had regained consciousness long enough to apologize to the two of them. Armin was just that kind of person. He would always put his friends before himself. Eren also knew how much he hated being saved, whether it be from bullies or from a fever. Armin wanted people to be able to depend on him.

As the trio sat in silence in the examination room, Shultz and Armin's grandfather talked just outside the room. Eren didn't catch most of it, but he was pretty sure he was negotiating the price with the old man.

Everyone's gotta make a living I guess. This isn't a charity...

Eren let out a long sigh at the thought and leaned back in his chair.

Guess I'll leave the grown up stuff to the grown ups for now.

They continued talking for a couple more minutes and Armin's grandfather entered the room, looking a little worried. Eren quickly gave up his chair to the elder and he graciously accepted the young boy's offer.

The old man let out a groan as he eased himself into the wooden chair.

"Ahhh, thank you my boy."

Eren shook his head, a warm smile on his face.

"Please, I still owe you so much for all you've done for Mikasa and I."

At the mention of her name, Mikasa turned and bowed her head in agreement and respect. Mr. Arlert let out a hearty chuckle.

"You flatter me kids," says the old man as he studies his sleeping grandson's face. "I'm not as benevolent as you think though. I only took you two in for his sake."

Eren shook his head and spoke to his elder once more. "That may be so, but we're both thankful nonetheless. We'll be sure to thank you properly when our father is found."

The young boy lies effortlessly. He knows his father will never return for them, but he says this to give the old man some respite. Eren also knows that Mr. Arlert's time is running out soon as well.

Soon it'll be only them three...

"Don't worry about it. You said you met him after the walls fell right? Your memory may be a little fuzzy as to what happened, but I'm sure he'll be back for you. It's a father's job to come back for his children..."

The old man trails off, his voice a little sad.

"I hope so too sir."

A silence falls upon the group, the mood a little sadder than what it was before. They sat there, all of them looking at the sleeping boy's face. Eren didn't know how much time passed before a knock echoed through the room and Shultz walked in.

The doctor glanced over at Armin and then to Eren. The young boy could tell the long nosed doctor was trying to find something to say, but was struggling to do so.

Eren noticed that his hand had started to shake slightly.

"Ahem," the doctor coughed and cleared his throat, getting the attention of the room.

"Well, the boy will be staying here for the night. You are all welcome to stay here as well. I have a guest bedroom for you Mr. Arlert. I can get the kids a cot. It won't be as comfortable but-"

"No, that's fine. I'll sleep here with my boy," interrupted Mr. Arlert. "The kids can have the bedroom."

Shultz raised an eyebrow at the objection, but just as quickly shrugged his shoulders with a "so be it."

The doctor motioned for the kids to follow him and they all left the old man alone with his family. In the hallway, he motioned once more for the kids to follow, to which they obeyed. They went up the stairs and came to halt at the first door across from the stairs. Shultz lazily opened the door to reveal a dark and unused bedroom. It was quite plain with no paintings or decor and only a singular dresser beside the bed.

"Well here it is. There's only one bed, but you guys are siblings so it's fine I guess," grumbled the doctor.

He immediately walked around the children as they took in their new surroundings and began to stumble down the hallway, his hand still shaking.

Eren spun around and called out to him in the dark hallway.

"Wait, Doctor Shultz!"

The doctor stopped and turned his head into the candlelight to reveal his tired features.

"Yeah?" he asked impatiently.

"Why are you helping us like this? I'm sure you spoke to Armin's grandfather about it, but we have very little money. I don't think we

can repay you."

Eren asked him this question, genuinely curious as to why such a stick in the mud would help them like this.

The doctor squinted, dark brown eyes piercing Eren.

"I'm a doctor. I help people. Besides, a kid like you shouldn't be worried about adult problems like money. Go to sleep."

And without another word, Shultz left the children in the dark hallway and headed for his own bedroom, the light from the candle in his hand growing ever distant.

The children obeyed and laid their heads down on the oh so comfortable pillows after pulling the covers up to their chins. Eren didn't have to see in the dark to know Mikasa was blushing with her face buried in her pillow. They have rarely ever slept like this save for that one time Eren had gotten really sick. He chuckled to himself as he turned on his side and tried to find the motivation to sleep.

The image of the doctor kept coming back to him throughout the night.

The image of his face when Eren asked him that question.

His dark brown eyes looked devoid of life.

His lip trembled.

His hand did the same.

It looked so painful.

With the image of that face burning in his mind, Eren didn't get much sleep that night.

...

Chapter 2 END

...

A/N 2: Okay so I wrote that author's note when I started this chapter, and now that I'm finished, I have a few more things I wanted to say. Firstly, I didn't expect to make this almost 13k words long. Sorry about that. Secondly, there are some portions that feel a tiny bit off with this chapter pacing wise. That could just be me critiquing my own work a little TOO much, but you guys let me know what you think. I hope you guys like the good doctor. I really enjoyed writing his segments and I plan to make him a pretty interesting character. As you can probably tell, I want to take my time with this story, so it'll be a while before any real action starts. Sorry about that as well. Also, point out any grammar mistakes I could have missed. It's almost 3 AM where I live, so I should get some sleep :P

Thank you for reading!

EDIT 1 (3/15/21): Fixed a small grammar error. Thanks Naenae for pointing it out!

Their Sins

A/N: Author's Note at the end contains some thoughts and reasons for me being MIA for about eight months. Please give it a read.

...

Chapter 3: Their Sins

...

"Grandpa, please don't go!"

The young Armin Arlert sprang forwards, enveloping his grandfather in a desperate, bone-crushing hug.

The older man felt his chest tighten and he had to choke back the feelings beginning to well up in his throat. He scratched pensively at his scruffy beard and finally rested his old hand on the blonde boy's head. It was an attempt to soothe the boy's anguish, but the older man knew he couldn't hope to do such a thing. The pair both knew what was going to happen.

"Please, my boy. I have no choice. I was one of the many people chosen for this role. The government has mandated it, and I must obey. We have to take back the walls."

The older man could barely rasp out the excuse, and the boy took notice of this.

"No!" shouted Armin. "I know you don't want to go! You can stay here with us! They're just sending you out there to die!"

The elder sighed.

I know that, he thought. It's a shame...

The older man wrestled his grandchild free from around his waist. Armin resisted at first, but his resistance ended just as quickly as it had begun. The only hint of movement coming from the young boy now was that of his shoulders bouncing up and down, shaking in rhythm with that of his sobs.

"My boy..."

Armin doesn't respond and only continues to sob.

"My boy! Look at me!" shouts the grandfather.

The young boy lifts his head and levels his gaze on his grandfather, tears silently leaking down both of their faces.

"You're too smart for your own good sometimes my boy. You're so smart... but you can't see that I have no choice. We all know what we're being sent out there to do. That's... just the cruel reality of this world."

The older Arlert sighed heavily. He could feel his resolve wavering, so he continues and finishes saying what he must to the boy.

"You must know. They weren't wrong."

Armin's round, tear filled eyes study his grandfather quizzically in response to his statement.

"Your parents... they weren't wrong." His voice catches and tears begin spilling forth from his eyes. "I know you used to sneak that book out from the house all of the time. I know you three would always be looking at it, dreaming of the world outside. The world beyond the walls... That world is out there. Your parents died believing that, and I will too..."

Armin's legs begin to shake and he grabs his grandfather's arms to steady himself.

"Stop," the boy sniffles. "Stop it! If you know that world is out there, why would you just give up?"

"Armin, my boy, I've spent my entire life behind these walls. They're my home, but they're not yours. The world outside is the true home of humanity, but I'm too old to reach it. That's why..."

A wrinkled finger gingerly wipes away the tears rolling down Armin's cheeks.

"You must reach it for us. All of us. For me, your parents, and all of those who have died and will die within these walls."

Any will to fight back was gone and Armin could only blankly stare at the ground.

Armin's grandfather felt a twinge of guilt worm its way into his heart.

How disgraceful of me... Pushing my wishes and dreams onto the next generation...

The thought crossed his mind and he pushed himself once more to comfort the heartbroken child in front of him.

"I'm sorry... That's not fair of-"

But as the elder went to apologize he noticed the boy tense up. The child in front of him who had always been so kind yet meek did something so extraordinary in that moment.

"Ok."

The child complied with the old man's selfish, final request. Armin had raised his head and looked his grandfather in the eyes once more. While still leaking tears, they showed none of the earlier sadness or uneasiness.

Instead, his bright blue eyes glowed with nothing but conviction. The young boy had not complied out of an eagerness to please his

grandfather, but because he had honestly wished to complete the request he had been tasked with.

When the scruffy, old man saw that, he let out a chuckle.

All of his earlier worries had been washed away and a sense of peace washed over him.

That look tells me all I need to know...

The old man took the worn and tattered hat from atop his head and gently rested it on his grandson's golden locks.

"We'll be counting on you."

The boy nodded in response and kept that unwavering look trained on his grandfather's back as he retreated into the crowds of refugees heading to their impending doom.

...

As the boy with the golden, smooth hair wrestled himself free from underneath the bed sheets in his room, his eyes rested on the hat on his bedside table. The final exchange between him and his last family member came flooding back into his mind.

"It's too early in the morning to be dwelling on such a thing..."

As a ray of light snuck its way through the white curtains of his room, it had made visible the copious amounts of dust in the air around him. Armin gently swiped his fingers over the rim of the hat, removing a modest amount of dust from the tattered material.

"It's only been sitting here for about a year, but the amount of dust in this place is crazy. Eren needs to pick up the slack..."

The blonde tears his attention away from the memento, rubbing the grime on his fingers directly onto his brown slacks. Taking the time to

make his bed, Armin goes about his daily routine with extreme diligence.

Make the bed.

Open the curtains.

Choose the day's outfit.

Close any books he had left open from the night before.

Gather any laundry of his that needed washing.

As his routine neared its completion, the boy had an armful of clothes in his grasp. Barely being able to see, Armin gently kicked open his door and was greeted by the lovely smell of breakfast.

"Ah, Armin we were just about to get you."

As the golden haired boy made his way into the kitchen, he was greeted by the voice of his close friend of many years, Eren Yeager. His friend was currently flipping an egg over the stove. Not far from Eren was Mikasa, the final friend in their inseparable trio. The young, dark haired girl was currently handing Eren another egg and toasting some bread.

The crackle and glow from the fire beneath the stove filled the kitchen air, accompanied by the scrape of metal on metal from the griddle and the noisy crinkle of a newspaper.

That was when Armin noticed the other tenant in his presence and the young boy bowed his head respectfully.

"Good morning everyone."

The doctor, Penn Shultz, bowed his head back to the boy.

"Good morning Armin," said the doctor rather uninterestedly as he flipped to the next page in his newspaper. The grouchy man's tone

was always like that, but the trio grew to understand that it was just the way the doctor spoke.

Unphased by the doctor's cold tone, the young Armin Arlert deposited his clothes quickly outside and rushed back in.

"I finished that book you lent me sir. The concepts were a little hard to understand, but I enjoyed it nonetheless!"

As the young boy finished, a small smile crept up to the doctor's face, diminishing the effects of his cold expression.

"That's alright," chuckled the doctor. "You'll grasp it all in due time. Besides that, you've been doing excellent work around the clinic. I was hoping the son of the doctor would have been a little more helpful though..."

"All that science talk always went over my head. I can't help having a one-track mind."

Eren retorted back quickly, letting himself fall into the doctor's trap. As the young, culinary duo placed the plates around the table and settled in, Shultz let out a raspy laugh.

"Hah! The military suits you just fine!"

They all smiled, save for Mikasa who kept up her stoic expression.

"Being a shut-in, know-it-all makes you a great doctor too I guess."

As Eren barked back his rebuttal, the doctor shoved a forkful of egg into his mouth.

"Oh shut up and eat boy."

At the doctor's request, Eren did just that, uttering a couple of frankly childish remarks under his breath. Shultz chuckled and the four of them ate in silence for a minute or two.

"These eggs are great Mikasa! The toast is wonderful too Eren! Great job!"

It was Armin's turn to chirp in a playful jab at the hotheaded, young Eren.

The latter decided not to take the bait, letting out only a low growl. Mikasa let out a quiet giggle before running a hand through her long, black hair.

Eren, now chewing very loudly, seethed.

"Indeed, young lady. I find it very horrifying that this young boy can't even flip a single egg!" said Shultz in an unusually high pitched voice.

The doctor's remark was the final straw and Eren let loose the building annoyance by shouting and slamming his fist on the table.

"I don't wanna hear that shit from the DOCTOR that can't even cook and instead makes a couple of kids do it for him! Besides, we all know it was ME who cooked those eggs!"

His outburst was countered by the laughter of everyone around him.

Eren sat there for a couple of seconds before slowly, albeit reluctantly, joining them.

I've been here for about two years now...

Quiet, yet tender thoughts resounded in Eren's mind.

It's been two years since I came back to this time. Two years since I undertook this mission to save Paradis once again.

I forgot moments like these could be so fun, but since I came back I've had so many of these moments. It's ironic considering the situation within these walls was so dire, but...

I'm enjoying my time here.

A warm smile forms on Eren's lips and the four of them resume their meals, talking about this and that.

They lamented at the fact that the cultivation project had failed and Eren had lost his job.

They rejoiced when informed of Armin's newfound love for medicine. Under the tutelage of Shultz, he was surely getting a great education.

The boys cringed when learning of the fate of an old geezer who had gotten too handsy with Mikasa at the market.

This past year they had spent with Shultz after the passing of their previous guardian, Armin's grandfather, were fond memories the trio would share when looking back on the grim times in the wake of the fall of Wall Maria.

The morning slowly and quietly slipped away from them as they enjoyed a hot meal and good-natured morning banter.

...

The sun had just fallen behind the large walls which both protected the Eldians within them, but also kept them caged. With reprieve from the heat, Eren let out a sigh of relief. He had been tending to the garden in the backyard after another long day of job searching and he could finally begin to cool off. With his clothes full of dirt and sweat, he slowly fell on his back onto the slightly cool earth below him. With a wipe of his forehead, he let out a sigh and forced himself back onto his butt and into a sitting position. The boy's gaze swivelled around the fenced in yard until finally resting on Mikasa.

She was doing the laundry, scrubbing clothes and leaving them to dry on the clothesline next to her. Shultz usually stuck her with the womanly jobs of the house as he was a little old-fashioned, but both

Armin and Eren knew Mikasa could more than handle any job the boys would be tasked with.

Her dark eyes were focused on the task at hand, yet she retained an air of comfortability by humming a simple tune. It was a song Eren had heard time and time again since Mikasa had come to live with the Yeagers.

Scrub clothes.

Rinse.

Wring out.

Hang.

Repeat.

Eren watched her do this simple activity a couple times, the soft melody never stopping once.

She's always doing her best, no matter what the task is, yet she always seems so bored...

The thought crossed the boy's mind as he revelled in the newfound shade.

"If this is so interesting to you, come do it for me." Mikasa's small voice carried itself gently to Eren's ears.

"Nah, I'm good. You look like you're having fun," Eren answered, a little caught off-guard that she noticed him staring.

She didn't answer back, only taking a moment to tuck her hair behind her ear and then resume her humming.

Eren let out a groan as he lifted himself off the ground, dusting off his butt and cracking his sore back as he did so.

"Hey Mikasa..." he started as he walked over to her. "I've never asked you cause it's so normal to me at this point, but what's that song you always hum around the house?"

Her hair fell around her face as she gently rose from the ground and hung one of Armin's shirts on the line. She lowered herself back to the ground and sat almost regally, before tucking her hair back behind her ear. One could almost say she looked and acted like a princess.

Well... she technically was...

"My mother taught me years ago," the dark haired girl whispered.

"Oh, okay. It's a pretty song," Eren chuckled, not meaning to bring up such a heavy topic.

"It is," Mikasa answered, a faint smile on her face. "Your mother really liked it too. She said it helped her relax."

The boy sat down next to her and laughed a little. "Really? That does sound like her. She liked the simple things."

Mikasa cast a glance towards Eren, an action which the latter of which took notice of.

"Hmm? Did I say something weird?"

The girl kept scrubbing a shirt, not answering right away. Her brow furrowed and a couple of silent moments passed. She finally looked Eren's way, but not directly at him before answering.

"Ever since the walls fell, you've been different Eren. Armin and I were worried about it at first, but..."

Their eyes finally met.

"I like this you more. You've been very... kind. We were worried what kind of path you were heading down when you said you wanted to

kill all the titans. That day on the boat really scared us. Ever since then though, you're not as angry or prone to action, save for that time with the Garrison soldiers."

Eren kept quiet, sensing she wanted to say more.

"Even talking about your mother doesn't send you into a rage like we thought it would," she continued. "You've really... grown."

When she finished, Mikasa's face was slightly flushed, so she turned away and continued scrubbing the clothes, her hair falling in her face yet again. She didn't bother to fix it this time.

Eren was a little flabbergasted, but a smile slowly formed on his face.

"Ha, was that it?" he chuckled as he scratched the side of his head and glanced away.

An awkward silence crept over the two of them and the boy scrambled to fix the atmosphere.

"Well, I guess I just had to grow up, ya know? I can't have you taking care of me forever!"

Mikasa nodded.

"Still," he continued. "I'm probably gonna be just as hopeless sometimes in the future. I'll be counting on you guys to watch my back. I'll do the same of course!"

The girl blushed harder, a curtain of hair hiding her face. She proceeded to just nod once more.

Walls, this situation got a little weird. I think I embarrassed her. Better get outta here.

"I, erm, should go let the Doc know I'm done. See ya." The boy quickly shot up and made his way to the backdoor. As he put his

hand on the knob, Eren paused and looked back at the girl over his shoulder.

"One more thing..." he began. "If your hair's bugging you that much, maybe we should get it trimmed a bit, or tie it up."

Mikasa stopped scrubbing and finally looked at him again.

"Ok," she said with a whisper and a smile. Her focus returned to the laundry and a soft melody began to float across the backyard's gentle winds.

With that, Eren went inside.

The door creaked and closed behind him and he was greeted by Armin who was studying at the dining table. At the sound of Eren's entrance, the blonde poked his nose out from behind his book,

"Hey, Eren."

"Yo," waved Eren. "Why aren't you in the study with the Doc?"

"He wasn't feeling well," answered Armin. "I think he's laying down for a while."

"Gotcha. I'll go check up on him. Thanks."

As Eren walked by the table and made his way to the hallway, Armin spoke up once more.

"Hey, Eren." The boy in question stopped and turned to his childhood friend once more.

"Yeah?"

"Well..." Armin paused for a second and continued. "It's good to know you'll have our back too."

Eren's face lit up with three different shades of red.

"How... how... did y-you hear that?!"

Armin pointed over to the kitchen window, which was wide open. The sound of Mikasa scrubbing the clothes could be clearly heard from where Eren was standing.

As embarrassed as he was, Eren grumbled out a reply.

"No problem."

He quickly turned away and raced up the stairs as if to run from the awkward situation itself.

With each step up the stairs, Eren clapped his hands against his face, as if to beat the embarrassment out of his flushed features. It didn't help.

Damn, this is just like that time on the train!

Shaking his head free of the memory, Eren finally reached the top of the stairs and went down the hall to the study entrance. The boy rapped his knuckles against the door a few times and turned the knob.

"Hey, Doc, it's me. The garden's weeded and-"

The boy stopped cold when he saw the sight before his eyes.

The Doc's study, which eerily reminded Eren of his father's study, was usually tidy and clear.

Guess all doctors have their neat little laboratory...

Now however, it looked like a titan had transformed in there. His desk was flipped over and open cabinets had long since had their contents flung out across the room. The candle had long since been snuffed out and the only light was that of a faint glow coming through the curtains thanks to the evening sky and the light from the hallway behind Eren.

"Doc?!"

No answer.

"Oh Walls... Doc you in here?!"

A faint groan resounded from a corner of the room.

"Doc! Hold on!"

Eren rushed to the source of the voice only to trip over something he couldn't see. A loud thud echoed around the room and glass bottles shattered into dozens of pieces under the boy's fallen body. Eren could feel the shards of glass dig into his palms and warm liquid began to seep out.

"Shit!" Eren cursed. "ARMIN! GET UP HERE AND BRING A LIGHT!"

A muffled voice resounded up the stairs, but Eren couldn't even hear what it had said, so he repeated anyway.

"GET UP HERE WITH A LIGHT! IT'S THE DOC!"

Eren waited a moment and could hear the faint thumps of footsteps racing around the first floor.

Picking the glass out of his hands with annoyed sighs, Eren made his way over to the sound of the voice from earlier, taking care not to make the same mistake twice. He couldn't see, but Eren's young hands finally felt the form of a person in the corner of the room.

"Doc?"

A cold and clammy hand weakly took hold of Eren's own.

"Ugh... kid..?"

"Hold on! Armin's coming! You're gonna be okay!"

The cold hand slipped off of Eren's and fell to the floor with a thud.

Eren could hear Armin rushing up behind him, and when he looked the boy had a lantern in his hand. Armin hadn't even asked what was wrong; the sight before the boys was evidence enough that whatever happened wasn't good.

As the light slowly illuminated the dark room, Shultz's form was made clear.

He laid in the corner of the room, balled up like a baby, sweating and delirious. His skin was cold to the touch as Eren found out just seconds before, and his usual white coat was discarded. The two boys could fully see the extent of his sweating as it looked like he had just stolen some of the clothes Mikasa had just hung up. He was drenched and clear liquid dripped off of his long, crooked nose. His pupils were dilated and the whites of his eyes were bloodshot. To top it all off, his body was shaking uncontrollably.

"We can't leave him like this! Get him on a stretcher!" barked Armin.

Eren obeyed instantly, hoisted the doctor up by his arms and the pair of boys walked the Doctor down the stairs to the clinic. As they struggled to reach the bottom of the stairs, Mikasa had just walked in, most likely roused by the commotion inside. When she saw the form of the doctor in the boys' arms, she rushed to them. In one swift motion, she took him from the boys and threw Shultz over her shoulder. Ever thankful for Mikasa's titan-like strength, the boys followed her into the clinic where she gently put him in the vacant bed there.

The Doctor's tremors didn't let up and he quickly began to foam at the mouth.

A look of horror crossed Eren's face and Armin sprung into action trying to help him. Mikasa and Eren could only watch as the blonde worked. They couldn't do anything to help and resided in helping

anyway Armin requested. After minutes of fighting the Doctor's seizures, Armin turned to Mikasa.

"Mikasa! You're the fastest! I need you to get Hannes at the Garrison guard house! I think he can help!"

Mikasa nodded and practically flew out the door at lightning speed.

It was then just the three of them and Armin had now turned his gaze to Eren.

"Eren help me strap him down so he doesn't hurt himself, I'll try keeping the belt in his mouth!"

"Right!"

The blonde had climbed on top of the Doctor, desperately trying to hold him down. Eren quickly handed Armin the straps so he could easily secure his arms and chest, while the former would handle the legs.

"Be careful around his mouth! Watch your fingers!" Eren said, a hint of uneasiness tainting his voice.

"I know!" was all Armin said as he continued to wrestle with Shultz's violent seizures.

We all took first aid courses in the corps, but I could never guess the real thing was as intense as this!

Eren grit his teeth as he struggled to hold the Doctor's legs and not get his teeth kicked in.

After what felt like an eternity the duo had succeeded in securing Shultz down, and with due time, the seizing slowly began to fade. Armin removed the rag, which he had shoved in earlier, from the Doctor's mouth slowly. Now all the boys had to do was keep an eye on him till Mikasa and Hannes got back.

The boys slumped down the bedside until they rested beside each other, both clearly out of breath. They exchanged a glance and a smile crossed both of their faces. They weakly bumped their fists together.

"Thanks for having my back," wheezed Eren.

"Same here," said Armin with an exasperated pant.

...

The sun had long since set and Shultz's clinic was almost dead silent save for the light snores from the Doctor. Other than that, the only sound was that of the bugs outside the window chirping. The children were all in chair's next to the bed, and Hannes accompanied them. He took his place leaned against the wall next to the bed.

All of them had sat like this for quite some time already and Hannes was the first one to break the silence.

"I shoulda seen this coming," he sighed.

"No, it was just as much our fault," said Eren quietly. Mikasa nodded in agreement while Armin had long since nodded off in his chair. He worked hard today.

"No. You guys are just kids, you wouldn't have known-" Hannes went to interject, but was interrupted by Eren.

"No. Over these past two years we saw it. His health suddenly dropped. That shaking of his got worse and he would always look near death. We knew he was getting worse, we just didn't know it was because of..." The young boy trailed off.

"I knew, but didn't do much to help," Hannes grumbled while looking at a tiny bottle filled with pills. The Garrison veteran had explained that it was Coderoine, a new, highly addictive drug making its rounds through the walls. This drug epidemic had just started a few years

ago, and supply had mostly been limited to the Inner Walls. With time however, production increased and now even refugees along with Outer Walls residents had been getting addicted to the stuff.

"I knew he was taking this shit, but I thought maybe you kids would get him off of it. Give him a sense of responsibility or something, you know? No such luck it seems," Hannes continued.

"We called you over because we thought you'd have more medical knowledge being in the military and all. Good thing it was you and not another soldier." Eren finished and let out a long sigh. This whole situation had turned into a giant headache.

"Agreed," answered Hannes. "He'd have been carried off to prison by the MP's already. That's no place for a man like him. Too good for that..."

The soldier trailed off and stared out the window blankly.

"Thanks as always Hannes. You're always helping us out," Mikasa whispered.

The soldier in question let slip a surprised look before looking away almost bashfully while scratching the back of his head.

"Don't worry 'bout it." He grumbled.

All of them sat in silence for a while, the Doctor's quiet snores filling the room once more along with the occasional creak of a chair when someone would shift in their seat.

With nothing to do, Eren played with the bandages on his hands. Armin had come into the room so fast earlier that the young titan shifter had no time to heal his wounds. So, he had to concede to letting Mikasa wrap them while Armin and Hannes tended to Shultz. It was only then that Eren noticed his blood was kind of... all over the place. He had got it on the bed, on the straps, on the floor, on the doorknob. Basically everywhere.

Now he had to feign an injury so that nobody would take notice of any steam that would rise from his wound should he choose to heal it.

A sense of peace washed over all of them, regardless of the dire circumstances they had found themselves in. The kids felt at peace when Hannes was with them, perhaps because he was one of the only things which remained from the long forgotten days they once enjoyed. Hannes felt the same way about the kids, for the same reasons as well. However, it wasn't as simple as them just being symbols of his old life, but something more.

He knew Eren's parents well, so well that he couldn't just abandon the children they left behind. Hannes also couldn't overlook how much he owed Grisha during the times of the plague. He even used to drink with Armin's parents and grandfather, listening to their tales about dreams of the outside world.

No, he couldn't abandon these kids. He owed their families' too much, and of course he loved them like family. Mikasa was always quiet, but she usually took the opportunity to make a witty remark. Armin was so bright and full of life, Hannes can't help but want to protect the little bookworm. And then Eren...

Always easy to tease and quick to anger, but so full of a sense of justice that you can't help but root for him, even if he fails. But the one thing Hannes admired most about Eren in particular was one thing:

He never quit, and he never *truly* failed.

Even when he got his ass kicked, he'd get back up with such tenacity that he almost seemed like a monster.

A stir in the chair next to Eren revealed Armin was slowly waking up.

"How long was I out?" he asked groggily.

Hannes pushed himself off the wall he was leaning on and let out a chuckle.

"Only 'bout twenty minutes," the soldier said as he ruffled the blonde's hair. "You did a good job today, so I'd say you earned a little cat nap. Word of advice though, don't hold down a person who's havin' a seizure. Seen a lot of head injuries in the Garrison and they're pretty common, but this ain't no play or nothin'; more injuries usually happen when you try and hold' em."

Armin looked down with a downtrodden face at the soldier's statement, but spoke with confidence all the same.

"I see. I'll do better next time."

"Let's hope there's not a next time," sighed Eren. "He's right though Armin. You still did a great job." Mikasa nodded in agreement.

Armin's eyes widened a bit and a soft smile settled on his face.

"Haha! Alright kids, applause all around. However, you guys should be getting to bed. Doc should be good till morning, and I'll be back to check on you all."

The kids nodded in agreement, Mikasa and Armin lifting themselves out of their seats. While making their way to leave, they all looked over to Eren who hadn't moved yet.

"Eren, aren't you coming?" asked Armin.

"Yeah, c'mon kid. Ain't anything left to do but wait," agreed Hannes.

Eren's gaze stayed fixed on Shultz's unmoving body though.

"You guys go on ahead, I'll catch up," Eren mumbled.

With one last look at the boy, Hannes and Armin left with no further persuasion. Mikasa, however, stayed behind a little longer, telling him, "Don't stay up too late."

Eren nodded without looking at her and she gently closed the door, silence permeating the room once more.

"I know you're up. You stopped snoring."

Eren spoke to the motionless figure which laid in the bed in front of him. Slowly, Shultz's figure stirred and he opened his eyes weakly.

"You've got good ears kid," was all the Doctor could rasp out.

Eren's gaze didn't stray from the Doctor's long, crooked nose. He always found himself unconsciously staring at it.

"Not really," the boy mumbled. Shultz let his head roll to the side so that he could finally look Eren in the eyes. "Well, what do you want?" he asked with not a hint of the usual annoyance in his voice.

"I wanted to ask you a question," said the boy. "Why did you become a doctor?"

Shultz's expression grew blank, like he was looking somewhere else entirely.

"My father was a doctor. Just seemed right," croaked the bedridden man.

"Huh..." Eren pondered. He waited a moment and then continued. "Do you do it because you have to, or because you enjoy it?"

"What a stupid question. Well... I suppose it's a little bit of both."

Eren said nothing, so the Doctor continued on his own.

"Medicine is all I know. Father taught me nothing else. Along the way, I guess for my own sanity I had to enjoy it. My life would be miserable."

The boy in the chair leaned back, still silent, his hands clasped together while his thumbs rubbed together.

"I know what you're doing. Letting me ramble. Trying to get me to confess something, aren't you?" asked the doctor, a slight chuckle rising in his throat.

"No," Eren shook his head. "Just thought listening would help you more."

"I couldn't tell you something you don't already know," snorted Shultz. "I'm sure Hannes told you everything after all."

"He did."

"Then you should know why I did what I did. I had no other choice but to be a doctor and *she*... Helga... was the only reason I could get by day-by-day. I never wanted this! Sure, helping people felt great, but without coming home to her smile everyday... I couldn't- I can't-"

Short sobs started to choke out the Doctor's voice. He composed himself shortly after and continued.

"The pills... the pills helped. They helped me handle it. When I took them, I could actually stand to *live* with myself. You always have to come down though, and when I would, the shaking would start. Every time I'd come down, I would make some tea to calm my nerves. Helga used to do that for me when I was stressed. Heh, no matter how hard I tried I could never replicate the flavor."

Eren only continued to listen to the tear-filled rambling.

"Then, I would see it. In the reflection of the kettle, or the windows, or the mirror. I would see this *fucking* scar. It would remind me what I did, and the cycle of abuse would start all over again."

"You got that scar the day the Walls fell right?" asked Eren. Shultz could only nod in response, his demeanor full of shame.

"My wife would accompany me on house calls. Back then I often made trips to surrounding districts. On that day, we both happened to be in Shiganshina making a house call. We both know what happened that day so I'll skip ahead a bit."

Eren nodded in sullen agreement.

"We were running after the big bastard kicked in the wall. We were almost to the inner gate when it happened. Some rubble from a building down the main street collapsed and she got trapped. Those Garrison bastards were firing those cannons willy-nilly. Walls, her screams... they'll haunt me till the day I die. I looked back and saw her trapped, but when I turned to help, I felt the ground shake. It was getting closer and closer and when I looked up, he was there: the Armored Titan. I froze, for how long I'm not sure, but I couldn't move. That is... until he began to run. When he started to run I... I turned around. I ran. It took all my strength not to look back at her and see her face. She didn't make a sound when I turned my back on her. I kept running until the bastard was practically on top of me and the force from all his stomping sent me careening into a wall. Along with that, a sharp piece of debris did a number on my face, and that's how I got this here."

The Doctor ran his finger along the now fully healed scar.

"After everything, I set up shop here in Trost and met some barkeep. Said all the booze I was drinking paled in comparison to the stuff he had. He made a fortune selling the shit to the refugees. Anyway, I got hooked on the pills after only the first time. When I took them, I felt normal. I could concentrate; I could forget. You know the rest."

When Shultz finished, Eren felt numb. He was full of anger, disgust, and other choice emotions, but he did his best to keep them in check. The resulting expression on his face could be likened to that of someone who just took a large gulp of sour milk.

"Hm... you really are... a piece of shit."

Shultz's eyes closed, accepting the young boy's judgement. He deserved it after all.

"I can't say that I don't understand though."

The man's eyes opened back up, shock clearly displayed on his face. When he opened his eyes, he was met by Eren's menacing gaze.

"Don't mistake my words, I'm not saying you're forgiven... I don't even have the authority to forgive you for such things anyway," the young boy muttered out that last bit with a tinge of pain in his voice.

"It's just that I understand where you're coming from. I knew someone who did many horrible things long ago. He killed many people to further his goals, saying it was for those he loved, that he had no other choice. At the end of the day, however, everything he did was for his own selfish whims."

It was now the Doctor's turn to listen.

"Somewhere along the way though, he found another option and he changed his plans. He could finally continue forward in a way which he wanted, in a way that could actually be beneficial to more. There was finally a better meaning he could give to all of those lives he had taken and those which had been sacrificed *for* him. He had to take those lives and those regrets which had accumulated and never forget them because if he forgot them, their sacrifices would have been for nothing. He may have been a monster, but that didn't mean he couldn't take his regrets and turn them into something good. It may not make up for the weight of his sins, but it might somewhere along the way help."

A palpable, pregnant silence filled the air after Eren finished his little speech. He hadn't realized how much he had been rambling, so when he noticed such, his eyes slowly drifted to the floor, breaking his gaze with the Doctor. The younger one's face was slightly flushed.

Great, you opened your mouth a little too much dumbass.

This thought was the only thing floating around in his head, the deafening silence just amplifying his embarrassment.

"Heh, how stupid..."

Shultz's words made Eren's face flush harder.

"You're right. Just forget I said-" he began, scrambling to remedy the tense atmosphere and looked up to meet the Doctor's gaze, but he fell silent just as quickly.

"... To think I would have some brat scolding me."

Penn Shultz, with an incredible smile Eren hadn't ever seen before on his face, said those words.

"To be fair," Shultz continued, "I find it worrisome that you would know someone like that."

Eren, still in a state of disbelief at the revelation that the man wasn't laughing at his ridiculous speech, fumbled his words to come up with an excuse.

Well, of course I know the guy... he's me!

"Ah... well, you see... I don't... know him per se, he's uhhh..." Eren fumbled his excuse. "He's a... character! Yeah! He's... from a book Armin and I used to read!"

"Ah, I see. That's good. I'll have to ask Armin about that book sometime. Seems interesting." Shultz said that, all the while nuzzling his bald head deeper into his pillow, a look of relief washing over him.

"Oh, don't bother. We lost it when the Walls fell!" Eren laughed weakly, now trying to desperately make sure Shultz doesn't try to look any deeper into his excuse.

"Ah..." sighed the Doctor, his eyes slowly sliding shut. "A shame."

Eren nodded, not that Shultz could see this gesture, and the silence returned.

They sat like that for a few minutes longer, basking in the dim, candle light of the room.

"Say Eren..."

"Yeah Doc?" answered the younger of the two.

"Do you really think a piece of shit like myself can just put their sins behind them? That I can just move on after hurting the one I love the most and then do something good?"

The boy looked over the Doctor's sickly form, seeing his eyes still peacefully shut.

"You owe it to those you've hurt. Don't let their lives go to waste."

"Hah," the Doctor croaked out a laugh. "I suppose you're right. Still, don't always go comparing life to a book. Well... I guess you are getting to *that age* ."

"And what the hell is that supposed to mean?!"

The outburst came as a surprise to even Eren himself, perhaps in response to some buried trauma from his first go at life.

Even so, the young boy caught himself laughing after the outburst, the Doctor doing the same. Eren was easy to rile up sometimes. He supposed some of his old habits would always be a part of him.

The light in the room flickered, leaving them in darkness as the candle extinguished itself, a scent of smoke wafting past their noses.

"Well, I suppose that's our cue. You should go and get some sleep, kid."

Eren nodded, again failing to realize Shultz couldn't see such a thing in the dark.

"Yeah. Goodnight Doc."

Shultz offered a grumbled response as Eren forced himself to his feet, finally feeling the effects of staying sitting for so long. His legs felt like jelly.

Eren slowly traversed the room in the dark and finally opened the door, slightly bathing the room in the light from the hallway outside. Sparing one last glance at the Doctor, the young boy closed the door, leaving the sickly man in complete darkness.

...

After the incident with the Doctor, the trio always did their best to check in with the man who opened their home to them. In the months after, Shultz had made many attempts to get clean. So far he had only relapsed once, which was an incredible feat in and of itself. Hannes would check in with him when things would get really bad, the two of them playing cards or something along those lines to distract Shultz. Eren had found another job in that time and continued to use the hard labor to train his body. Mikasa sometimes accompanied Eren to work, sharing the workload with him, but was more often than not at home. Armin had taken the chance to redouble his efforts in the clinic and further his medical knowledge, under the Doctor's still watchful eye of course.

And so they all continued on like that. Two months turned into four, then to eight months, and before they knew it, almost an entire year had passed.

It was closing in soon.

The day the three of them would leave and enlist.

They all knew it was coming, and the trio had long since made their pact to enlist together. Eren of course enlisted so that he could become a Scout. There was no other path in which he wanted to walk, and Mikasa would of course follow him. Armin enlisted as well, partly because he wanted to follow Eren as well, but he also had his own objective. It was the mission his grandfather had given him right before leaving. To that end, Armin would also join the Scouts to complete his dream. No, it wasn't his dream anymore, it was the dream of his parents, his grandfather, and all those who came before.

Before long, that time of the year came. The time right before summer turned to fall, and the air began to grow colder and crisper. That was the time in which they would leave.

It was a cool morning and the orange sun had just begun to peek over the Walls. The kids and Shultz stood outside the clinic, rucksacks at their feet. They were filled to the brim with clothes and some personal effects permitted for them to keep at the Southern Division training camp.

"Are you sure you'll be okay Doc?" asked Eren, no longer the young boy he was when the walls fell. He was now a *slightly older* young boy. He had grown a bit in the past year, but that could be said for the whole trio of course. Their bodies had only just started changing and by the time they would graduate the Cadets, they would certainly be almost unrecognizable.

Shultz looked forward to the day he could see them become fine soldiers and he expressed such sentiment in his response.

"I'll be just fine. I should be asking that of you three. I hear basic training is absolutely killer, but I'm sure you'll all do fine."

The kids all beamed at the doctor.

"We really can't thank you enough Doctor," chirped Armin. "You've given us so much, and never asked for anything in return."

Mikasa and Eren nodded in agreement.

Shultz peered at the children over his long, crooked nose, flashing a warm smile at them. It was uncharacteristic of the man when they first met, but the children didn't show any surprise. They had gotten more used to his smile over the past year. After that night, he had opened up to them considerably. The trio had to get used to it first, but now his warm demeanor is commonplace in the clinic.

"I'm a doctor, it's my job to help people. Besides, if it wasn't for you kids, I definitely wouldn't be here. So, thank you as well."

The kids nodded, and made one last check of all of their belongings before setting out. With one final wave, the kids turned their back on Shultz and the clinic, the place they had called home for about two years at this point. As soon as they had turned around Shultz turned his back as well, disappearing into the clinic without any hesitation.

That's just like him, thought Eren as he peeked over his shoulder.

And so, the trio rounded the corner and the clinic vanished from their sight. The kids made their way through the crowds of other enlistees heading for the refugee shelter near the inner gate, not looking forward to being packed into carriages to make the trip to the training camp. They waited their turn for what felt like hours, almost being swallowed up by the crowd multiple times. After being corralled like animals into a carriage by some Military Police, Eren and his friends could finally rest their legs. As for personal space however, there was almost none to be found as about a dozen kids his age were packed together in seats like sardines within the carriage.

Being cramped together was almost bearable, that is until Eren got a whiff of something. Most of the kids around him were refugees too, but unlike the trio, didn't have the fortune to be taken in by someone. As such, they most definitely didn't have access to a place to bathe

and Eren and Armin were definitely getting the full brunt of the smell. Luckily, Mikasa could drown out some of the stench by retreating behind her scarf. They definitely didn't miss this smell.

"Welp, this is it guys. Last chance to bail. I wouldn't blame you," laughed Eren.

"And leave you alone to get eaten by a titan? No way."

A small, muffled retort came out of the Hizuru descendant's mouth. The titan shifter knew he would be met with disagreement, but made the attempt at a joke anyway.

"Yeah, I knew you would say something like that," Eren sighed with a chuckle.

"Well of course we would!" chirped Armin. "What happened to us counting on each other huh? How could we do that if we're not together?"

"Haha, relax. Just trying to ease the tension."

"Well, you never were one for reading the mood," Mikasa laughed.

"Haaaaah? What's that supposed to mean?"

"We're saying you're an idiot Eren," laughed Armin. "We wouldn't have come this far with you just to back out now! Besides..."

He trailed off.

"... If we can take back the Walls, *that's* waiting for us on the other side."

The trio grew silent, each knowing what Armin was talking about, but not directly saying it.

The sea.

Eren stayed silent, a feeling hard to describe welling up in his chest. He suppressed it and looked Armin right in his eyes.

"Right, what was I thinking?" said Eren with a smile and a laugh.

The blonde returned the smile, only ten times as big and bright as Eren's. With a nod, the trio tried to get as comfortable as they could in their seats. It was going to be a long and bumpy ride after all...

Eren's mind kept stirring however.

Once we finally take back the walls, and kill all the titans, and we finally get to the sea...

What comes after that?

The future is just as uncertain as the first time Eren went through his life. There was a lot to think about and change, but no easy solution. He couldn't just go through his life like the first time, but if he changed too much, he ran the risk of the future changing too much and he would lose his advantage.

He closed his eyes and let his head fall back.

A warmth washed over him.

He could see it.

That scenery .

If I could somehow see it once more, I might get a clue as to what to do next. I might get a clue as to how to reach it. I have the Founder, but it hasn't been activated with Royal blood, so I can't enter the Paths willingly. However, I'll run the risk of seeing too much. Like last time...

Eren's consciousness crept back to that moment in time when he kissed Historia's hand and the Founder's full power along with the Attack Titan's caused him to see the future through memories. At the

time, it was too much, and basically caused his mind to overload. Following that, Eren would regularly experience moments of pure hysteria accompanying memories of the past, present, and future. During these moments he couldn't even tell the difference between the three.

Such was the Founder's curse, only compounded by the Attack Titan's ability to see the future.

Still, that might be my only course of action at the moment, as much as I hate to say it. If that's the case then...

I gotta meet Historia.

...

Chapter 3: Their Sins END

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A/N: Okay, so this isn't dead, or at least I don't want it to be. First, let me say, I don't know what the upload schedule will be like for this and I'll tell you why. AOT's ending broke me. I hated it so much that I lost my passion and drive for this series for a long time. I couldn't even muster the strength to continue this after the ending. That being said, I recently got back into the mood to write, and I finally felt the desire to continue this.

I want to thank those who still found and read this even all these months later. I also want to apologize to those who I kept waiting. I hope you enjoyed this chapter as I tried to flesh out Shultz a little more before moving on. I plan to reintroduce him in Trost Arc, so he won't be gone forever. I also wanted to give a little more depth into Armin and Mikasa's relationship with Eren, as well as give Armin some stronger motivations.

To the reviewer who asked if I'll be glossing over the Training Arc, I will not. This story was always planned to be a bit slower

and I really want to focus on character relationships as I really enjoy writing them. I'm sorry to those of you who were hoping for something more action-packed, though I assure you there will be some action later on. Like I said, I can't commit to an upload schedule, but I'll try my best to make the chapters pretty sizable when they do come out. 8k to 10k words is my goal. I also might come back and edit these chapters later on, but I'll of course let you guys know when I do.

Anyway, thank you for reading and I hope all of you continue to enjoy it. Please point out any grammar mistakes you see and feel free to leave a review if you like.